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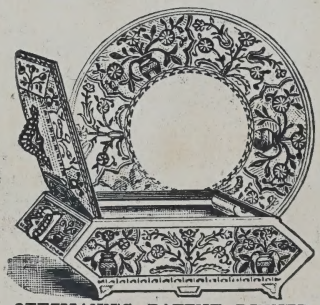

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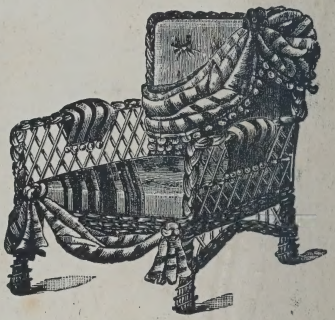

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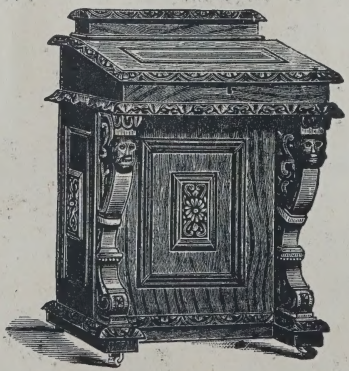

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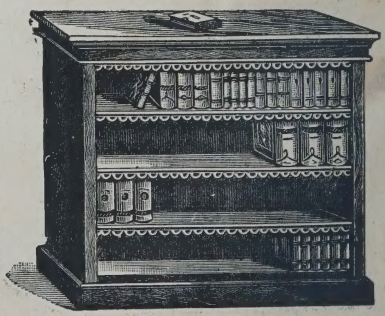

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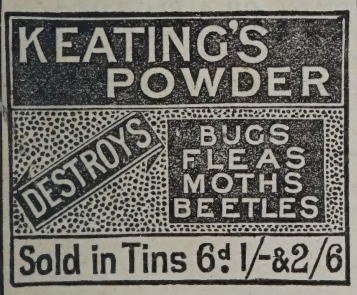

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THE

HOUSE BY THE COMMON

BY

THOMAS COBB,

AUTHOR OF

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ETC., ETC.

With Illustrations.

WARD, LOCK AND CO.

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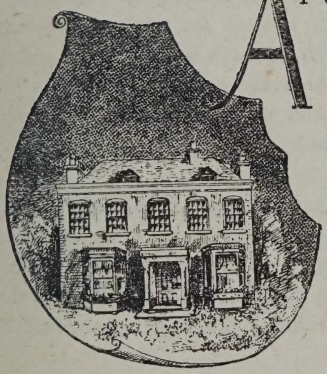
THE HOUSE BY THE COMMON.

CHAPTER I.

THE FRIARS.



AT eight o'clock on Saturday evening the 2nd of July, 188–, I was sitting in my dining-room, overlooking Tunbridge Wells Common. My predecessor, Dr. Brown, was dead, and I had purchased his practice, and taken possession of his house (far too large for my bachelor requirements) two days ago.

The bell rang, and entering the consulting-room, I found a well-dressed man, with a long, gaunt face of a Jewish type, dark, and ill-favoured.

"Dr. Everest," he said, stroking his small, well-waxed moustache, and I bowed assent. "I want you to come at once to Colonel Manningtree; the house is not far, just across the common—perhaps you know The Friars."

Taking my hat and stick, I accompanied him without delay.

"What is the matter with Colonel Manningtree?" I asked, as we struck across the grass.

"A fit of some kind. Of course, Mrs. Manningtree is frightened out of her wits. I am her brother."

Passing the Wellington Hotel, we turned to the right. The blue sky was flecked with clouds like hurrying sail, the air was laden with the scent of hay; a pair of crows flew, cawing, homewards. Leaving the common, we turned down a lane opposite a stagnant pond, and though we had left a house at its corner, before we had gone a hundred yards it seemed that we were miles from every human habitation.

On our right the path was darkened by tall trees, on the left a margin of waste ground was flanked by a high hedge, full of honeysuckle and blackberry blossom. A few hundred yards farther down, the lane curved, bringing into view a large house, standing back from the roadway.

"That is The Friars," said my guide, pointing with his stick.

It was a gloomy-looking old house. An attempt had been made to restore its grey front, with as much success as if a grimy-faced boy had washed his face in a saucer. Brown streaks ran unevenly down from its frieze and window-sills; its bordering, fluted pillars being of a darker shade, like the edging on mourning note-paper.

It stood two storeys high, a square, massive building, looking as if it were weighed down by its own gloom. A house which looked as if the sun never shone upon it, and, indeed, it seldom had; a house in which children could never have romped and laughed, in which you could neither make a pun nor dare to tell a ghost story.

We entered its high wooden gate, following a winding gravel drive, strewn with leaves from the rhododendron beds on our left; but even the brightness of the flowers seemed only to make the gloom of the house more noticeable.

It stood in an angle formed by two lanes, its long back-garden being separated from that which ran by its side by a high oak paling.

As we entered the house without either ringing or knocking,

I saw that the interior was more inviting than the outside. Heavy curtains were draped across the hall, the walls were almost hidden by black-framed engravings. I was conducted to a bedroom on the first floor, a large, sparsely-furnished room, with its blinds drawn down. It felt cold, even on this sultry July evening. Against the wall stood a small camp bedstead, on which lay a white-headed man of about seventy years.

"I have brought Dr. Everest," said my companion, and a woman stepped softly into the light thrown by a crimson-shaded lamp.

Mrs. Manningtree could not be more than five-and-thirty, or about half her husband's age: in the beauty of her prime. It was beauty of form and colour, rather than of feature, whilst her shape was perfect, her hair black, her complexion warmly tinted, there was a certain hardness about her face, not counteracted by her full, red, sensual lips. The red light seemed to suit her quiet, self-possessed movements, her low, clear voice; there was something purring, almost feline, in her manner, which contrasted strangely with the cold steadiness of her gaze.

After a few common-place remarks, I examined my patient. The diagnosis presented no difficulties. It was a case of apoplexy, encouraged, doubtless, by the hearty meal and the liberal allowance of wine, of which, I learned, Colonel Manningtree had partaken at two o'clock.

"To-morrow," I said, preparing to leave, "we must find a nurse."

"If you please, no, Dr. Everest," Mrs. Manningtree answered. "I could not bear the idea of his being cared for by anyone but myself. I am sure that you will find me a good nurse."

Aware that Colonel Manningtree would not require anyone's services for long, I acquiesced, and shortly afterwards quitted the house with Lascelles, who had introduced me to it.

"What is your candid opinion?" he inquired, as I opened my hall door, a quarter-of-an-hour later and handed him a bottle of medicine. "Has the colonel any chance?"

"He is an old man," I replied, "I am afraid he will not speak again."

"Then," said Lascelles, "I had better communicate with his daughter. She is away on a visit to Norwich."

"And if you lose much time," I hinted, "your niece may be too late!"

"Oh, she is not my niece, doctor. The colonel married my sister only three months ago. Miss Manningtree is, of course, her step-daughter. But you may be sure I won't lose any time."

The next day was Sunday, and I reached The Friars at ten o'clock, being admitted by Mr. Lascelles himself, who conducted me upstairs At seven o'clock that evening I visited Colonel Manningtree again, and once more on Monday morning, by which time he was *in extremis*. He had not spoken since his seizure. No professional nurse could have attended to his wants with more care than Mrs. Manningtree, and, indeed, no effort was spared to prolong the life which it was impossible to save.

When, at half-past three on Monday afternoon, I paid my next visit, I glanced apprehensively at the windows; the blinds were not drawn down, but Mrs. Manningtree and Mr. Lascelles met me at the door and their faces warned me that all was over.

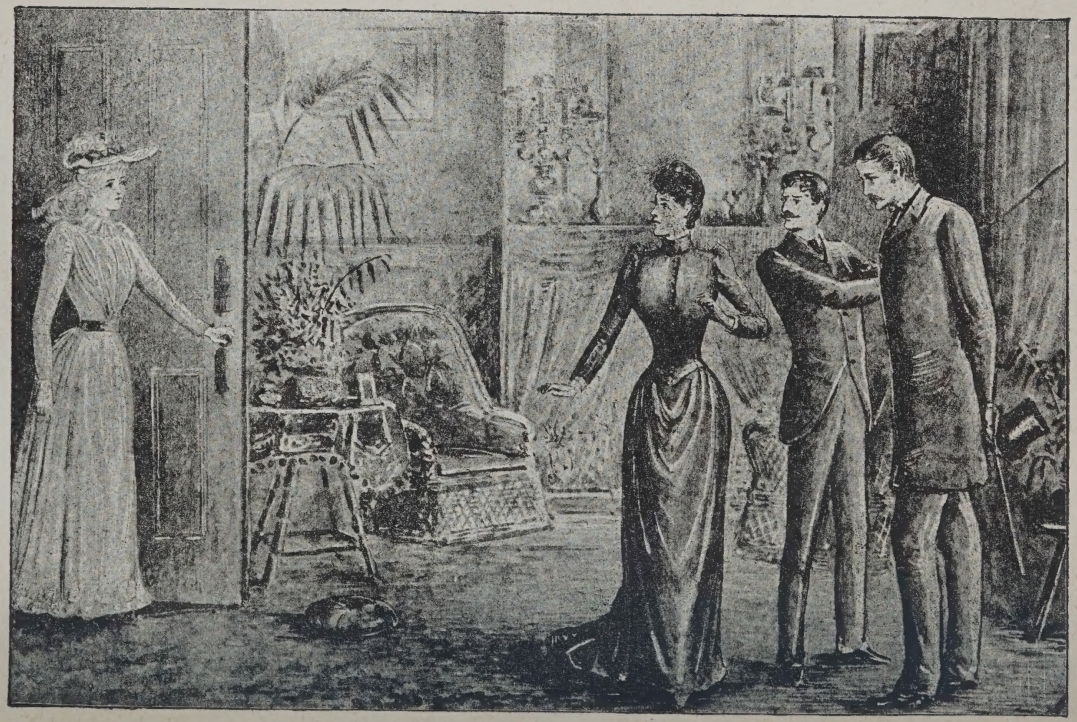
"Colonel Manningtree died twenty minutes ago," said Lascelles, and his sister pressed her handkerchief to her eyes. At their request I followed them upstairs, looked at the body and descended to the drawing-room.

Although expensively furnished, it looked as bare as the rest of the house, as if the walls were too high for the chairs, the space too ample for the tables.

"Miss Manningtree did not reach home in time to see her father," I remarked, as Lascelles stepped forward to close one of the windows which opened on to the front garden.

"No," he replied, "you see, it was too late to wire after you came on Saturday, doctor, and yesterday being Sunday——"

"But," I interrupted him, "the head office is open at certain



"THE DOOR OF THE ROOM OPENED, AND A TALL SLENDER GIRL STOOD ON THE THRESHOLD."

hours both morning and evening on Sunday, and you can wire from the railway station all day long."

"By Jove! I wish I had known that," he said, letting the latch of the window fall into its groove. "The fact is, Dr. Everest, this illness of the poor old colonel's has knocked me off my head a bit. I could not leave Mrs. Manningtree this morning, and now, of course, it is too late!"

As he seized the cord to lower the Venetian blind, I heard wheels on the gravel drive. A carriage door was slammed, there was a light step on the stones in front of the house; the hall door was quickly opened. Then a fresh, girlish voice broke through the utter silence which had fallen on that house of death. "Father! father!"

The next minute the door of the room opened, and a tall, slender girl stood on the threshold. Her dress of drab Indian silk fitted her loosely, her fair hair fell carelessly beneath the wide-brimmed straw hat. Her clear, laughing, blue eyes, her up-curved lips, the very poise of her graceful figure told that she was ignorant of her great bereavement.

"Dora!" exclaimed Mrs. Manningtree, starting backwards in amazement as the girl stared from one to the other.

"I thought I should surprise you," she cried; "I could not help myself. I was bound to come, whether I liked it or not. The children have scarlatina, and Helena would not let me stay. I would not telegraph, because I wanted to give father a surprise. Where is he?"

"This is Dr. Everest, Dora," faltered Mrs. Manningtree; and as Dora looked inquiringly in my direction, I bowed in response.

"Colonel Manningtree is not—is not ill?" she said, the smile fading from her face as she stepped farther within the room.

"Colonel Manningtree has been very ill," I answered; and with crimson cheeks, she turned towards Mrs. Manningtree.

"Why was I not sent for?" she demanded, in a tone which warned me that she had no great love for her stepmother. "How long has my father been ill, Dr. Everest? A week ago, when he wrote to me, he said he never felt better."

"I was going to telegraph to-day," said Lascelles, in a sympathetic voice; "but when the worst——"

The expression of her eyes underwent a terrible change; her face seemed to grow old as I looked upon it.

"The worst!" she exclaimed; "the worst! You do not mean—you cannot mean that he is dead!" Then she turned her woe-begone face to me. "Dr. Everest, you attended my father; will you tell me just the truth?"

"Colonel Manningtree died less than an hour ago," I answered, convinced that a short answer was really the kindest.

No tears fell. Her lips quivered, and, raising her hands, she took off her hat, tossing it to the top of the grand piano.

"Take me to him!" she cried; but Mrs. Manningtree appeared able neither to speak nor to act for the moment.

Deeply moved myself, I did not marvel at her evident disturbance. But, mastering herself, she came to Dora's side.

"My darling child, you are not fit to see your father yet. It is a terrible ordeal that you have to go through; you must not enter the chamber of death until you are calmer."

"I am perfectly calm," said Dora.

"Dr. Everest will tell you that I am right," continued Mrs. Manningtree. "He will tell you that you ought to wait until you have rested, until you are more like yourself."

It was her very calmness which alarmed me for her; her sorrow being of that quiet, repressed, dry-eyed kind, which is the most disastrous.

"I think that Mrs. Manningtree is right," I said. "You will bear the shock better if you rest first. It is only the question of a few hours."

As if resigning herself to the inevitable, Dora sank into a chair. Five minutes later I had quitted the grief-stricken girl, and was standing on the common, in the full glare of the summer sunshine, watching a cricket match amidst a throng of light-hearted spectators.

CHAPTER II.

AN UNEXPECTED VISITOR.

COULD not banish Dora's image from my mind that evening, though, unless the shocks she had sustained resulted in illness, it was unlikely we should meet again.

The following morning I sat down to breakfast, as usual, at half-past eight. After breakfast, I retired to the consulting-room, where patients were introduced in turn. It was after ten o'clock, when, to my infinite surprise, Miss Manningtree entered. Instead of the light-coloured dress, she was clad in dark-blue, while the flapping straw hat had given place to a neater arrangement in black. Her mass of fair hair seemed to be fastened closer to her head ; she looked less like a girl, more like a woman.

"I—I have not come as a patient," she began timidly ; and though I replied that I was glad to hear it, a glance was sufficient to show that she laboured under great excitement. Her cheeks were flushed, her pupils dilated, and she breathed quickly.

"Will you sit down, and tell me what I can do for you," I said, and she took the chair which I had placed.

"You must wonder why I trouble you, Dr. Everest," she continued. "I ought not to have come—I know I ought not to have come; but I am a stranger here. I have not a friend, not even an acquaintance; not a soul to turn to for advice, and I—I need it sorely."

"You did quite right to come, Miss Manningtree. You have but to tell me how I can serve you."

"Only by listening," she said, in that high-pitched voice which is a sure sign of intense emotion. "Only by letting me tell you my story." She shuddered violently, glancing behind her with every sign of terror.

"I am ready to listen as long as you like," I assured her, and settling myself in my writing-chair, did not interrupt until she finished her narrative.

"You heard Mrs. Manningtree promise that I should see my father last night, Dr. Everest? She broke her promise, and, although I implored her to fulfil it, declined to let me enter his room till this morning. At ten o'clock I retired for the night, angry, broken-spirited, thoroughly wretched. I was alone in the house with them, and—and with *him*. The servants were all gone. Mrs. Manningtree explained that they had misbehaved themselves, that others must be engaged in a few days' time. Their place was at present supplied by one woman, and she left the house at nine o'clock.

"I was unable to sleep. I sat thinking again and again of the happy days with my father before we met her—before we met Mrs. Manningtree. I seemed to see his face, almost to hear his voice. It appeared impossible that he should have so suddenly gone out of my life, that I should never look upon his face again. It was the first time I ever felt utterly hopeless. When I lost my mother three years ago, I was still a child, and my father was left. Now I am alone—utterly alone; of so little account that these people even forgot to tell me he was ill!

"God Himself seemed to have deserted me. Useless to implore Him to give me back my father; whilst to pray for strength to bear this burden, which was so unbearable, was as futile. At half-past eleven, after extinguishing the gas, I looked out of window. The night was dark, the air oppressive. As the clouds shifted, I saw one star, and even its loneliness seemed no greater than my own. If it had been daylight I should have seen nothing but trees and meadows: to all intents and purposes the house is isolated. I remember laying my burning head on the pillow; I suppose I soon fell asleep. I knew nothing more until I awoke, sitting up in bed. It was still dark, though a narrow faint streak of grey fell on the ceiling above the window. Whilst only half-awake I seemed to be listening intently. What were the sounds I heard through the stillness of the night?

"Thud—thud—thud! at regular monotonous intervals. I listened more carefully. Thud—thud—thud! The sounds were faint and muffled; I doubted whether they were real, or the product of my own imagination.

"Suddenly a horrible idea seized me. It was the digging of a grave. I seemed to hear the spade cut the earth, to distinguish the fall of each fresh clod. Though I thought it only a horrible fancy, I became afraid. Springing out of bed, I grasped the blind cord to admit such dim light as there might be.

"As I stood with the cord in my hand, I grew cold with terror. I could not have moved to save my life; my arm was paralyzed by fear. Was I going mad? Was I the victim of a second delusion? The sounds were muffled like those I had heard before; they also seemed faint and far away. Yet I heard them distinctly.

"'Dora! Dora!'

"It was my father's voice—the voice I had never hoped to hear again.

"'Dora! Dora!'

"The cry was full of despair. It sounded as if far away, as if it had come indeed from another world. I fell on my knees and prayed aloud—prayed that I might not go mad. But the voice

broke in on my petition, and, gaining courage from my very fears, I hastily threw on my clothes. Was it a mistake after all? was my father, whom they thought dead, still alive? More courageous now, I opened the door and cautiously groped my way along the passage. His room was only a few yards from mine. All was still as death. The cool morning air found its way into the house; the birds were already rustling in their nests outside. The streak of grey on the ceiling grew paler and broader. Thinking of nothing but gaining his presence, at last I stood outside his door. I tried the handle; to my dismay, the door was locked.

"Afraid lest I should disturb Mrs. Manningtree, or Mr. Lascelles, I stood there a few minutes shuddering. Then, disappointed, I was turning away, half-persuaded that the sounds were due to my imagination, when again those piteous cries struck my ears.

"'Dora! Dora!'

"Whether they came from this world, or from that other of which we know so little, they were full of entreaty. Whatever it was, it was a cry of distress. Persistent, since the words were repeated, I impatiently tried to force the lock. There were other doors adjacent. From one of them I took a key; at first it would not turn, but exerting all my strength, at last I made it yield.

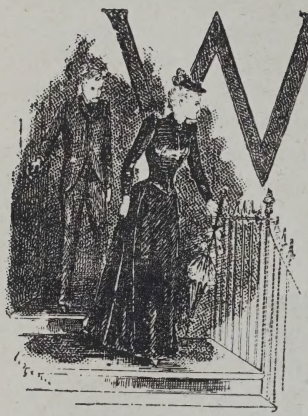
"Gathering courage, I opened the door. I was familiar with the room, the increasing light made its contents dimly visible. There stood the camp bedstead—he would sleep on no other—on it lay the tall figure just as it might have lain in life, save that one sheet was spread completely over it from crown to sole. As soon as I saw the form, distinguishable beneath its thin covering, I knew that my senses had deceived me. It suggested nothing but death. There was a stillness greater and more solemn than that of sleep. As the sheet lay on his features, falling beneath the chin, rising again over his hands folded across the breast, you could tell that it covered a corpse.

"I stood beside the bedstead a few seconds, longing to look upon my father's face, yet so overwhelmed with dread, never having

looked upon the dead before, that I hesitated to touch the sheet. The light was stronger by this time, the birds were beginning to twitter. At last I took the corner of the sheet in my hand, and raised it from the head, so that I had only to draw it aside to disclose my father's face. For a moment I waited with the linen held above the forehead, then with a quick movement, withdrew it. I started back overcome with amazement. Surely this was not my father. I looked again at the face, lowering my eyes to its level. I examined it closely and long. Dr. Everest, the body which lay on that bed was not my father's."

CHAPTER III.

ADVICE.



WHILE Dora spoke, she lived again through the horrors of the night. Though her eyes were turned towards my face, I do not believe she saw it. Telling of the sounds she had heard, she listened to them again.

When she related her stealthy passage from room to room, she lowered her voice and crouched in the chair. Describing the lifting of the sheet, she started back in horror, as if looking again upon the face which was not her father's.

But while she had a sympathetic listener, she had one who was a hardened sceptic in such matters. How frequently had I not heard of strange sounds, of whispering voices, of constant watchings, even of vile conspiracies. I had been a witness to the blow dealt yesterday with such cruel suddenness. I had seen her enter the drawing-room at The Friars, full of hope and joy, and delighted anticipations of her father's surprise; had seen all the life, all the brightness, fade from her face when she heard of his illness, had seen it replaced by dull, benumbing, grief, when she heard of his death.

"Did you leave the room exactly as you found it?" I asked, anxious that Mrs. Manningtree should not hear of her nocturnal visit.

"I replaced the sheet," she continued. "Reverence for the dead caused me to do that. I locked the door and put back the key. When I reached my room, unobserved, I tried to think, but my head was on fire. Everything seemed so confused; I could see nothing clearly. Yet, surely, it was not possible I could be deceived——"

"Then, Miss Manningtree, you still entertain some doubt whether it was your father or not?"

"No, no," she said, throwing back her head. "Only I could not at once realize the evidence of my senses. Not the shadow of a doubt. The body was assuredly not my father's. Yet where was he? what had become of him? His voice had cried my name. Was it his grave they were digging, while he was still alive? And he was alive, for he had called to me. Is it any wonder if I failed to grasp the truth at once, that I am driven to appeal to you—stranger though you are?"

"Would to heaven I could help you," I cried, meaning not precisely what she meant.

"You can help me, Dr. Everest," she answered, excitedly. "You can insist on seeing the body again. You will find it is not that of your patient. You can demand an inquiry and so clear up the mystery. You must see," she added, "that there is some terrible mystery."

"To ask to see the corpse again would be opposed to every rule of my profession," I answered. "I should not even have asked to look at it after death; knowing as I did, all the particulars of your father's illness. But your mother——"

"No, no; don't say that, Dr. Everest. Not my mother. Mrs. Manningtree is almost a stranger; I know so little of her. Father knew scarcely more. We met her at Cannes only a few weeks before he married her. She was travelling with Mr. Lascelles—her brother. We knew nothing of her family,

of her friends or of herself. But, of course, she knew everything about us."

"How was that?" I asked.

"Colonel Manningtree's name had been in all the papers. We have not always been rich; that was why father stayed so long in India. My mother died there. You must have read about the 'Manningtree Probate Case.'"

I recollected it perfectly. It had been a nine days' wonder; the plaintiff securing something like £200,000.

"Was your father the successful party to that suit?" I asked.

"How heartily I wish he had lost it," Dora cried, "then they would have left him alone. I should have had him all to myself, we might have been happy together now. But they knew he was rich and——" she paused a few moments, adding impulsively, "Oh, Dr. Everest, what must you think of my telling all this to a stranger!"

In truth, I could not regard her as a stranger, and though I had seen her for the first time yesterday, I felt a stronger interest in Dora Manningtree than in any other woman.

"If I do not tell you," she continued, "what shall I do? I must do something. I cannot rest while his cry for help remains unanswered. He may be yet alive."

"I can assure you that the man I saw dead," I said, "was the patient whom I attended from the first. Do you happen to possess a photograph of your father?"

She shook her head sorrowfully, and so this test was not practicable.

"Father would never have his photograph taken, Dr. Everest; but there could be no mistaking him. He was the handsomest man I ever saw; tall, beyond the average; bronzed; very erect."

"I saw the patient only on his bed," I replied. "He had been undressed before my arrival. He was certainly tall and bronzed; clean shaven——"

"Yes, yes," she exclaimed, staring at me in a bewildered expression. "That is the description of Colonel Manningtree."

"Then," I said, "since my description tallies with yours, do you not see that you must be mistaken in your account of the event of the night?"

"You refuse to help me!" she cried, rising impulsively.

I would, however, have done a great deal to help her, could I only see the way. But to go to Mrs. Manningtree, demanding a second inspection of her husband's body, was opposed alike to professional etiquette, and to my own idea of what was fitting.

"No," I assured her, rising also, "I do not refuse to help you. On the contrary, if you will first follow my advice, I will undertake to assist you if the necessity still remain. I will go further than this. If you do what I am about to suggest, and afterwards desire me to see the body, I will see it at all costs."

"Tell me what I am to do," she exclaimed, glancing eagerly around as if to set about it at once. "Tell me what to do and I will do it."

"In the first place, Miss Manningtree," I said, with some confidence, "I am convinced that you are mistaken."

"Then, Dr. Everest, you must think that I am simply mad."

"Pray sit down, while I tell you exactly what I do think," I said, and after a momentary hesitation, she resumed her seat. "Instead of receiving your father's welcome yesterday," I continued, "you received news of his death. It was naturally a terrific shock to you. You heard me agree with Mrs. Manningtree, that it was better to wait awhile before you saw Colonel Manningtree's body. Doubtless, she saw that the evening found you no more tranquil, and hence her postponement of your trial until to-day. If I had administered a restorative before you retired last night, you would have heard neither the voices nor the sounds. You were intensely overwrought, and awakening suddenly and hearing the windows rattle or some other noise of the night, full of thoughts of death, you interpreted the sounds as you did. By the time you reached your father's room, you were prepared to imagine anything. The light was dim, you are unused to the changes wrought by death; you were a fit subject for an hallucination; it was easy

to imagine that these features did not belong to Colonel Manningtree, whom you had last seen in full health and vigour. If you had waited, according to Mrs. Manningtree's wish, until this morning, I am convinced this doubt would never have entered your mind. Now, this is what I want you to do. It is a simple matter——"

"Whatever it may be, I will do it; if you will help me afterwards, Dr. Everest."

"It is merely to return to The Friars, and to act as if this had not happened," I said, not failing to notice her disappointment. "Wait until Mrs. Manningtree takes you to the room——"

"Suppose she still refuses me admission!" cried Dora.

"She will not refuse. Enter the room with her; look well at the corpse, and I am convinced that you will see it is that of Colonel Manningtree."

"And, if it is not, Dr. Everest. If I come to tell you it is not my father who lies there, you will insist upon seeing it yourself before it is buried," she exclaimed, eagerly.

"That I promise," I said, as she turned towards the door. "More than that: I will not sign the certificate of death until I have heard from you again. Mr. Lascelles has arranged to call for it here at one o'clock. I will take care to be out of the way at that hour, and I will leave a note requesting him to call again this evening at eight. In the meantime, you will either have convinced yourself of your mistake——"

"I am not mistaken, Dr. Everest."

"Then, in that case, you may command my services. I will make an opportunity to fulfil my promise without loss of time."

It was a rash promise, but I was so confident of Dora's mistake that I had little hesitation in making it. At the worst, I must invent an excuse for examining my patient's body again, before granting the certificate.

"How will you manage to communicate with me again?" I asked, as I stood with my hand on the front door.

"There will be little difficulty," she answered, "if you do not mind my coming here again. I am on my way to order mourning,

and I daresay the dressmaker will want to fit me this evening. May I come at six o'clock ! "

"Better not be later," I said, "in case you run up against Mr. Lascelles—a very undesirable rencontre."

Overwhelming me with thanks, she glanced to the right and left along the London Road, as I opened the door, and then set forth hurriedly towards Church Street.

CHAPTER IV.

SECOND THOUGHTS.

AS I stood looking after her I could not but contrast her sorrow with the gay morning. It was eleven o'clock, the sun shone in a cloudless sky, the common looked its best. Everything seemed to bid mankind rejoice, but this girl of twenty was incapable of obedience.

As I went my daily round Dora was always in my thoughts. Her face cropped up between one child's teething fits and another's measles, between one man's broken arm and another's delirium tremens.

Upon Mr. Lascelles' arrival at one o'clock, I took care to be out, or, at least, "not at home." That I was not far away is proved by the fact that I heard him swear when he read my letter asking him to call again at eight o'clock in the evening. I looked forward to Dora's visit with impatience. Not that I doubted, for a moment, her complete conviction. She had awakened my warmest interest. I did not analyze my feelings then, nor shall I attempt to do so now. She

had thrown herself upon me for help and advice; she was young and, above all, she was beautiful. Even her sorrow, her terror, could not deprive her of charm, and, though I had seen her only twice, I seemed to know her intimately.

At six o'clock she entered the consulting-room for the second time that day, and although she appeared more self-possessed and more distant in manner than she had done in the morning, there was an awe-struck expression in her eyes which filled me with pity and alarm.

"I have been looking anxiously for your visit," I said, closing the door and placing a chair. "I hope you bring more satisfactory news."

"I cannot understand it," she answered, with a shudder. "You may think it satisfactory. For me—I cannot understand it."

"At all events, Mrs. Manningtree did not again oppose your wish to enter your father's room?"

"On the contrary," Dora continued, "she seemed anxious to take me there. When she met me at the door, she almost reproached me for being absent so long, for not showing greater anxiety to see my father. I tell you frankly, Dr. Everest, I was taken back by surprise: I had anticipated some fresh excuse. I don't know how I got upstairs, how I reached the room. I asked myself whether my experience of last night was all a dream. There stood the bed, exactly as I left it at three o'clock, its burthen covered just as if the sheet had not been disturbed. Mrs. Manningtree treated me very kindly, placed her arm about me, supporting me as I waited by the bed—you cannot imagine how anxiously. The few minutes seemed an eternity; I thought she would never draw aside the sheet. Without her aid, I must have fallen; the room seemed to swim round me; all my senses were concentrated on her movements. At last she drew aside the sheet——"

She shuddered violently, and for an instant pressed her gloved hands to her eyes, while I also felt cold from head to foot, as if her horror was contagious.

"I could not believe my eyes," she continued. "The body lay in the same position—the hands crossed on the breast, the head slightly raised, as if he were calmly sleeping. But the face had changed. It was my father I looked upon now. There was a beautiful smile on his lips, his face looked as noble as in life. I cried aloud as I fell forward on the bed; then I suppose I fainted. I knew nothing else, and when I opened my eyes I was lying in my own room."

"At least," I said, deeply moved by the tears which fell so freely now, "at least, this is better than what you told me this morning."

"Is it?" she cried, as if she were really in doubt, "is it better, Dr. Everest?"

"Anything must be better than a mystery," I replied. "Your father is dead, that alone is a grievous sorrow for you. But you know that he died in peace, that though you were not by to comfort him—indeed, had you been there, he could not have recognized you—everything was done which love could dictate."

"But," she cried, "it is more mysterious than ever. It is true that I saw my father dead at noon to-day; but, by the same token, I heard his voice in the night. Another body lay then where his lies now. How can I account for that; is it not a complete mystery?"

"I account for it by the fact that your own overwrought senses deceived you, Miss Manningtree."

For a few minutes she sat staring piteously into my face. "I have thought of that," she said, presently, "but I cannot make myself believe it yet. I seem to remember both faces so distinctly, so separately. I can see them now; I shall never forget them. I can compare their features and distinguish their differences. There was not the slightest resemblance between them."

"Yet," I suggested, "my description of my patient agreed with yours of Colonel Manningtree."

"I know—I know, but what of that? Both were old men,

both had bronzed faces, both were shaven. That is all. Besides, there was the voice, his cry to me. Oh," she cried despairingly, "is this the way people go mad, Dr. Everest?" Then, after a brief silence, she added, "Do you believe that the dead can communicate with those they love on earth? Could I hear my father speaking from another world? We know so little about it; do you think it is possible? Sometimes I have thought so—that, unable to bid me farewell here, he spoke during the night. Do you think it is possible?"

"No," I answered. "To be frank, Miss Manningtree, I do not think so. I believe that you have been the victim of an hallucination from first to last. Put it aside, now. Believe me, it is dangerous to encourage it. Reason with yourself, or, better still, put it away without reasoning, and in a few days' time—when you have learned to accept the situation, painful as it is—you will see that I am right."

"It may be so," she answered more calmly; "even now I almost feel that I ought to agree with you. You have been very kind: I cannot thank you enough."

"I have done nothing," I said. "I am thankful to know, now, that there is no need to do anything."

"No," she replied, "there is no need. If you went to The Friars now, you would see only Colonel Manningtree's body."

"The same that I saw yesterday," I interposed.

"But," she continued, "you have done a great deal for me, Dr. Everest. You have listened to me patiently, and if I had had no one to speak to, what should I have done. If it had not been for you, I might, in my desperation, have betrayed myself to Mrs. Manningtree. I would not pain her needlessly—perhaps she loved him, too; though no one loved him as I did."

She went away in a healthier frame of mind than she came; and before she had been gone a quarter of an hour I was wondering when, if ever, I should see her again. At eight o'clock I was told of Lascelles' arrival.

"Rather a bore, doctor, missing you this morning," he said, offering his hand as I entered the consulting-room.

Feeling guilty, I murmured some excuse about a medical man's time being seldom his own, and sat down at my desk to fill in the certificate.

"You see, it's as well to bury as soon as you can at this time of year," he continued. "We have settled on Friday. Mrs. Manningtree sends her compliments, and hopes you will follow and come to luncheon afterwards. There will be only the four of us."

"Had Colonel Manningtree been so unfortunate as to outlive his friends?" I asked, as I signed the paper.

"Well, yes, most of them," said Lascelles, fingering his sharp-pointed moustache; "and, besides, he had been so long in India that they all forgot him. To tell you the truth," he added, with that ready familiarity which is a near approach to vulgarity, "those friends he had left did not take kindly to his second marriage. Old enough to please himself, too, wasn't he? Well, it's Mrs. Manningtree's turn now, and she means to cut the lot."

But for my desire to see Dora upon any and every occasion, the invitation to luncheon would not have been accepted; but, in the circumstances, I promised to be at the funeral instead of merely sending the carriage, as I had intended.

Surely a house never looked more mournful than The Friars on our return at two o'clock on Friday from the cemetery. The night's rain had left damp patches on its face, and the window sills and the frieze looked more tearful than ever. The down-drawn blinds imparted to it a deserted appearance, and the hall seemed to reverberate with our voices.

A neat servant, in a black dress and a white cap, waited at table. Mrs. Manningtree's crape dress suited her white, sorrow-stricken face; while the cold glitter of her light grey eyes still struck me as being out of harmony with her soft, purring manner. Mr. Lascelles was almost a dandy in the depth of his mourning. But Dora was not at the table.

"I hope Miss Manningtree is quite well," I asked.

"Poor Dora! She is as well as I can expect, Dr. Everest. The shock was so terribly sudden; she dearly loved her father—indeed, no one could help loving the colonel," and she cast down her eyes.

"Yes, a capital fellow the colonel," said Lascelles, pushing back his chair. "Time for a cigar in the garden, doctor?"

I had time for anything which increased the chance of meeting Dora, and rising from the table, I followed Lascelles through the hall and out by a back door, glazed as to its upper half with four panes.

The left half of the garden formed a lawn-tennis court; the right half which was about a foot lower, also being of grass, with a large beech-tree in the middle and well-filled flower-beds all round.

"You have a big place here," I suggested, as we stooped to avoid the spreading branches.

"Far too big, doctor. I expect we shall leave it now. Too big for three persons."

"I suppose you intend to remain with Mrs. Manningtree?" I said, interested in all that concerned Dora.

"Oh, yes! I shan't think of leaving her yet awhile," he answered, stopping to blow a cloud of smoke over an aphis-covered rosebud. "The poor old colonel was very fond of his roses. An uncertain thing—life, doctor?"

With the blazing sun on my defenceless head I was inclined to agree with him, and espying a rustic summer-house a few yards ahead, I hastened to take advantage of its shelter.

"Yes," he continued, entering after me and treading down some slight unevenness of the turf. "Yes, we are here to-day and gone to-morrow."

We remained there, I listening while he talked, until our cigars were finished, and then walked towards the house.

"You don't use that?" I said, pointing to a coach-house and

stable, which, almost hidden by trees, stood at the extreme end of the long garden, and opened into the lane.

"No," he replied; "if he had lived, poor old chap, the colonel would have set up some horses; but I don't suppose we shall ever use it now."

We passed through the hall, and I quitted the house without seeing either Dora or Mrs. Manningtree.

CHAPTER V.

ON THE PANTILES.

COLONEL MANNINGTREE was buried on the 8th of July, and a week followed without bringing any sign or news of Dora. Unless I met her in the town, or was summoned professionally to The Friars, I stood little chance of seeing her again. As Lascelles had hinted at the possibility of going abroad, I began to fear lest she should leave England without a word.

On Tuesday the 19th of July, I left my victoria at the end of the Pantiles, by the Chapel of Ease, or the "Church of King Charles the Martyr," as it is now named, while I visited a patient at a shop beneath the Colonnade. It was past noon and whilst the sun shone hotly on the common, here, beneath the lime-trees, the coolness was delicious. Many persons availed themselves of their shadow; others, disdaining it, walked up and down, trying to keep step to the march from Tannhäuser.

Having driven in the heat since ten o'clock, on leaving my

patient's house I lingered a moment, wishing that I might catch a glimpse of the face which was so often in my thoughts.

Suddenly I saw it, lowered over a book. On a chair, somewhat apart from the rest—back against the railings clad entirely in black, but with her fair hair falling loosely beneath a wide-brimmed straw hat, sat Dora.

Making my way between two or three Bath-chairs, and as many perambulators, amongst a miscellaneous collection of dogs and playing children, I soon stood before her waiting until she raised her eyes.

"You were lost to all the world, Miss Manningtree!"

"I think I was, Dr. Everest," she said, with a faint smile. "Thanks to the author of this book, whoever he or she may be, I had forgotten myself and everybody."

"Including so unimportant a body as myself," I answered, taking a chair beside her. For she had seemed not at once to recognize me.

"It took me a few seconds to come back to real life," she replied; "fiction seems far more agreeable. But I am not sufficiently ungrateful to forget you. Not that I expected to see you this morning. It is the first time I have left the house since—since the funeral."

"That was nearly a fortnight ago. Have you not been well, or do you usually shut yourself up in that fashion?"

"If I had not been well, I imagine we should have met sooner," she answered. "You may be sure that Mrs. Manningtree would have sent for you. But she is inclined to kill me with kindness, I think. Indeed, she cannot bear me long out of her sight. Besides, she thinks it hardly suitable we should be seen about so soon. As if it mattered; as if anything mattered!"

"It certainly is important that you should get all the change you can," I said, for she looked pale and worn.

"Well, I am afraid we shall have change enough before long."

"You—you are not going away?" I said, anxiously.

"I believe that Mrs. Manningtree thinks of leaving England

very soon, Dr. Everest. Nothing else is talked of; I don't know where they are going to. They have not settled on any place yet. Only that they will go abroad."

"And you, Miss Manningtree; are you to accompany them?"

"That," she said, "seems to go without saying. Probably I shall not have a choice offered me. I cannot bear the idea of going abroad again, much as I looked forward to it before. But father was alive then!"

"Why don't you tell Mrs. Manningtree that you pre to stay behind? Surely she will not take you against your wi I suggested, quite as anxious as herself that she should not go.

"Perhaps I shall tell her, Dr. Everest. It depends to some extent on you."

"On me?" I exclaimed, only wishing that it did.

"Well, upon the advice you give me. You see, I am going to trouble you again. That is why I have been looking forward to see you," she said naïvely. "I have no one else to consult; no one whose opinion is really of the least value. I want you to tell me how a woman—a lady—can set about earning her livelihood."

"Lots of women—lots of ladies—do set about it and do accomplish it," I answered, greatly surprised at the question. "But a good many find the struggle a hard one. Surely you are not speaking of yourself."

"Why not, Dr. Everest?"

"Well, you told me that Colonel Manningtree was rich, and that you were his only child. It is natural to suppose you would inherit a considerable share of his fortune."

"You can take in my fortune at a glance!" she cried, slightly raising her hands. "Not the book, that belongs to the Literary Society. Dr. Everest, I do not possess a penny in the world; not one farthing. Unless I accompany Mrs. Manningtree and Mr. Lascelles abroad—if it were not for him I should not so much mind—unless I go wherever she is pleased to take me, I must depend upon my own exertions for my daily bread."

"Colonel Manningtree can never have been so unnatural—so unjust——"

She interrupted me impatiently, somewhat proudly.

"My father had a right to dispose of his own as he pleased. He did so. Everything: his house, his land, his books, his pictures, everything he died possessed of, went unconditionally to Mrs. Manningtree. The will was signed a few days before his death; and I," she added bitterly, "I am left with the rest of the miscellaneous articles to her care. You see that unless I am prepared to link my life with hers—with hers and Mr. Lascelles'—my question was not entirely unnecessary. I don't know whether you understand such matters, but if you do—if you can point the way I should go, you will add still further to the debt I already owe you."

"It is impossible to give you other advice than this, Miss Manningtree. Remain with your stepmother. If your father had not been convinced of her fitness to take charge of you he would never have left her his whole fortune."

This advice went sadly against the grain, since if she followed it, she might leave Tunbridge Wells almost at once.

"Poor father!" she murmured, and we were silent awhile.

The band played, the crowd listened and talked, the dogs lay lazily in the sunshine, the children frolicked and laughed, and I saw the tears which Dora with difficulty kept from falling.

"You tell me that Mrs. Manningtree is disposed to do her duty towards you, that she shows you every kindness," I urged, presently.

"Yes," she answered, slowly, "I complain of nothing; only I do not wish to leave England. After all, she is almost a stranger to me. For a month after the wedding I did not see her. I knew nothing of her previously, as you know. I had been away from home three weeks before my father's death. I have a strong dislike to her brother. No, I will not—I cannot, go abroad with them. I would rather submit to any hardship in England. You will think me weak—I cannot help it. I have a dread of

"POOR FATHER!" SHE MURMURED, AND WE WERE SILENT AWHILE.

going away, and—and—perhaps my father will—will speak to me again."

"You have not been troubled by any more of those fancies?" I inquired, anxiously.

"Not since that terrible night," she answered. "Dr. Everest, there are times when I think you were right; but there are other times when I wonder, and wonder, until I am convinced you were wrong. Then, again, I think we were both right and both wrong; that, though I heard his voice, the rest was imagination. Why should I not have heard his voice? You cannot say it was impossible—nobody knows—nobody."

"But," I said, "there is the universal experience to guide us, and that furnishes a kind of negative proof."

"And there is evidence on the other side also," she replied, excitedly. "There is hardly a man or woman living but knows someone who has had an experience like my own—hardly one. It is the fashion to sneer at such statements now, but it used not to be. How do you know that our forefathers were not right, that we are not wrong? Frightened as it makes me, I almost like to think that he spoke to me. Dr. Everest," she added, rising from her chair as the band ceased playing, "this is one of my believing days. I am certain that I heard his voice, as certain as—thanks to your persuasion—I am that he was dead before he spoke to me."

We strolled slowly along the Pantiles towards my victoria, allowing the crowd to pass us. I saw the futility of reasoning with Dora, and, indeed, so long as the hallucination was not repeated, I did not care; especially as she had come round to my way of thinking about the corpse.

"I hope I shall see you again soon," I said, as she offered her hand. "As yet I have not given you the information you asked for."

"I hope so, too, Dr. Everest. I need your advice urgently," she replied, and left me.

Several days passed, however, and I saw no sign of her. I

visited my patient at the Pantiles with admirable assiduity, but without the slightest gratification of my own desires. While I had advised Dora to remain with Mrs. Manningtree rather than to throw herself alone on the merciless world, I fervently hoped that she would not follow my counsel—at least, if it entailed a visit abroad. It seemed certain that she dreaded to leave England and the few friends she possessed; but while I perceived an undercurrent of dislike to Mrs. Manningtree, Mr. Lascelles was her special object of antipathy. I was little surprised, when I came to think of it, at Colonel Manningtree's senile infatuation, costly as it had been to Dora; and if I saw the difficulties of her position, I also perceived one solution of them—a very thorough solution, a heroic remedy—which yet I hardly dared to contemplate.

On Tuesday morning, the 3rd of August, I paid what conscience warned me must be my last visit to my patient at the shop under the Colonnade, and leaving his door, gave a hopeless glance amongst the group of visitors beneath the lime-trees. To my infinite satisfaction, Dora was sitting near the spot where I had seen her last.

Persons in strange costumes were parading up and down, perseveringly trying to keep time with the band, in marvellous hats to brave the sun, in still more marvellous blazers as if to rival its glories. Invalids in Bath-chairs were accompanied by blue-cloaked, long-veiled nurses; every chair beneath the trees was occupied. At the further end of the Pantiles a few pale enthusiasts paid their pennies to the "dipper" in exchange for glasses of inky-flavoured water from the spring, whilst hypochondriacal dogs lapped the overflow from the red pool below.

But I had eyes only for the graceful, girlish figure in deep mourning; and, indeed, there was something, which I am quite unable to describe, which marked her out for distinction. Perhaps it was her unusual fairness; perhaps it was the dainty grace of her bearing; perhaps it was her very unconsciousness of these charms, which were combined with the sweetest face man ever looked upon.

"A novel again, Miss Manningtree?" I said, and she closed the book as she raised her eyes.

"Shocking waste of time, is it not?" she answered, as she held out her hand. "I always scold myself if I open a novel before luncheon. But I am taking a kind of holiday this morning. When I am not taking a holiday, I have nothing to do; only I do it differently. How is it that you also are wasting your time. Have you cured all your patients?"

"I have just left one," I said, glancing towards the Colonnade; "it is only twelve o'clock, and I have an hour to spare. Would it be possible to prevail upon you to come for a stroll on the common?"

"I should like it," she answered, rising at once; and leaving the Pantiles, we passed the Pump Room, by which I had left my carriage. Ordering it again for three o'clock, when I must complete the round left unfinished now, I led Dora along the Eridge Road.

CHAPTER VI.

FOREBODINGS.

"SO you have not been taken away from your native land against your will," I said with a laugh.

It was intensely hot this morning, and as we reached the muddy pond which goes by the name of the "Brighton Lake," she stopped and put up her sunshade.

"You have the best evidence of the fact, Dr. Everest. Indeed, I begin to hope that I am reprieved, that nobody will go away for the present, at all events."

"I did not think for a moment that Mrs. Manningtree would refuse to accede to your wishes," I said.

"She did refuse, very decidedly at first," was the reply; "but I was equally decided. One must make a stand for liberty, you know. Somebody says it is the only thing worth fighting for. But, after all, I am little better than a slave. Who holds the purse, holds power. I have to

apply to Mrs. Manningtree for every penny I require now. It is hateful—detestable."

"Yet surely you need feel no sense of obligation," I urged. "The money was your father's. Some persons would say it is morally yours now. By changing her intention to go abroad, Mrs. Manningtree has, at any rate, given proof of her desire to please you."

Having ascended from the level of the pond, we stood still. The sun was reflected dazzlingly by the glass houses on Broadwater Down, while the dark pine woods beyond appeared contrastingly cool and sombre. The Eridge Road wound in and out, white between the fields; in the middle distance, on our right, was a hop garden; a train steamed noisily into the station below on the left.

"I am not blaming Mrs. Manningtree," Dora answered. "I am merely commiserating my own lot. But she did not give way quite so agreeably as you think. She did what I have never known her to do before: she lost her temper. As a rule, Mrs. Manningtree is self-possession personified. If she is angry, she grows more cool. This time she stormed at me, but, though I was frightened, I would not yield. She declared that she was going, and that I must accompany her. This took place before Mr. Lascelles, who looked as if he would willingly compel me."

"Still," I persisted, "the best of us lose our tempers now and then, and it was only a storm in a teacup. It is to her credit that you have never known Mrs. Manningtree to lose her temper before."

"At all events," Dora continued, "she announced her altered decision this morning. She called me to her room after breakfast, and I confess she spoke kindly enough. My father had left me to her care, she reminded me; she could never forget that she owed it to him to watch over my interests; she could never let these clash with her own. Since I did not wish it, I should not leave home at present; the journey was postponed."

"That," I hinted, "was all you could desire."

"Mrs. Manningtree told me she was going to London this morning," Dora resumed, "and as soon as she started, I took a book and came to the Pantiles. I could not stay in the house alone with Mr. Lascelles. I only wish I need not return."

"But," I said, "you will not be absolutely alone with him; there are the servants."

"There are no servants," she answered, as we reached Hungershall Park, "only Mrs. Hutchings—the woman who was there when Colonel Manningtree died."

"I know there was only the one woman in the house at that time," I said; "but a housemaid waited at table on the day of the funeral."

"That was Mrs. Hutchings' daughter; sometimes she comes to help her mother. Mrs. Manningtree gave her mourning, especially for your benefit, I suppose; she has not appeared in it since. Mrs. Manningtree said it was not worth while to engage fresh servants, as she intended going abroad. Now, I should think she will get some; it is very uncomfortable as it is."

"Perhaps," I suggested, "she has gone to London for that purpose to-day."

"Dr. Everest," said Dora, stopping as we descended the hill, "why is it that there is never anybody but ourselves in the house at night?"

"There is Mrs. Hutchings——" I began.

"She goes away at nine o'clock and comes before breakfast. The top floor of the house is deserted. No one goes there but Mr. Lascelles. I dare not go; I scarcely dare to go to my own room at night."

I disliked the idea of Dora's being alone in that house with Lascelles. Most of us judge persons by their faces, and just as I had formed my opinion of Dora from the first glance at her, so I summed up Lascelles' character the moment I saw him in my consulting-room on the evening of the 2nd of July.

"For how long has Mrs. Manningtree gone?" I asked.

"She promised to return to-night," was the answer. "But

suppose there should be an accident, that she misses the train; suppose she does not return! Mrs. Hutchings will go away at nine o'clock; I shall be alone in the house with Mr. Lascelles. I cannot endure that—I shall never be able to stay. Yet," she added, pitifully, "I have nowhere else to go to."

Now I had not started out that morning with any intention of telling Dora of my love. Indeed, I had no certainty that I should see her, and whilst I was convinced that years would not enable me to know her better than I did already, I did not wish to ruin my chance of success by too great precipitation. But when she uttered her last piteous words, looking the while so sorrowfully into my face, a mad impulse seized me.

"Dora," I cried, drawing close to her side, "come to me."

The change in her face instantly warned me of my mistake. Trusting me implicitly, she had laid bare her heart to the only friend she possessed within many miles.

I had allowed myself to believe that her confidence betokened something more than mere friendship. I had taken advantage of her trust.

Her face flushed, her shoulders were thrown back, her head was held more erect. As she drew close to the low hedge which skirted the road, she regarded me with deep reproach.

"*Et tu Brute!*" her blue eyes seemed to say.

In order to exonerate myself I felt bound to continue on my unfortunate course. In order to obtain her forgiveness, I must convince her, at least, of my earnestness.

"I fear I have been over-bold," I began, but she impetuously interrupted me.

"I do not understand you, Dr. Everest. I am afraid I—I have misunderstood you all along."

"Don't say that," I urged her. "Let me make my meaning clear. Dora, I love you——"

"Whom you have not seen half-a-dozen times, nor for six hours altogether," she cried contemptuously.

"It is true, nevertheless," I continued. "It was true when I

had seen you only once—it will be true if I see you a thousand times. From the first moment I looked on your face—that day when you entered the room expecting to see your father—I loved you. I recognize my mistake; you do not return my love. I ought to have waited for happier days before speaking of it, yet it was only your unhappiness which forced my hand. My mother lives in London; I would have taken you to her, now, to-day. You would be welcomed as a daughter until you could bring yourself to become her son's wife."

She stared wistfully before her a few moments, and I knew she dared not trust herself to speak.

"If I spoke hastily, forgive me, Dr. Everest," she faltered, presently.

"Only tell me you pardon my impatience," I urged. "Dora, is it not possible to do as I ask you?"

"No, no," she cried, raising her hands imploringly, "I cannot do that. I appreciate your kindness—the kindness which prompts so great a sacrifice. I cannot think of anything—of my own happiness—of anything—until I decide as to my future."

"That is what I ask you to do, to decide your future by consenting to marry me. I am not a rich man; but neither am I entirely dependent on my practice. Let it go; we will leave this place, and your happiness shall be my first consideration as long as I live."

"Please do not say any more," she murmured. "What you ask cannot be. You must see how impossible it is. I will never involve another in my own fate."

"Your—your own fate!"

"I have never dared to speak, even to you, to whom I have told so much, of what is on my mind. I cannot account for the feeling; but it is terribly real. Sometimes I think that such an all-pervading conviction is more truly important than any amount of reasoning. Dr. Everest, I know that there is some awful doom hanging over me."

"What makes you think so?" I asked, as coolly as I could.

"I do not know; it may be the very atmosphere I breathe. I cannot shake off the feeling. Do what I will, go where I will, there is always hanging over me this sense of impending doom."

"A moment's cool consideration will show you how irrational are your fears," I urged.

"It is not so much a fear as a foreboding, Dr. Everest. Oh! I know you cannot realize the truth of it. I know it must appear as the result of my own morbid fancy. But," she added solemnly, "you will see. You will see what fate is in store for me, and that I shall have no power to resist it."

Have you ever, when listening to a ghost story, been impelled to glance over your shoulder to make sure that nothing gruesome was there? You do not believe in ghosts, perhaps. But that does not matter. You are surrounded, as it were, by the atmosphere of the story; its narrator has entrapped your reason, his fiction encompasses you round about, and, like the lady in Mrs. Crowe's "Night Side of Nature," if you do not believe in ghosts, you feel very decidedly that you would not like to see one.

Now, I was sure that Dora's foreboding had no foundation. I did not share her fear for an instant, yet, listening to her expression of it, witnessing her strong conviction, I did become, for the moment, afraid of what might be in store for her. And, knowing that, in certain cases, it is as difficult to arrive at all the facts which lead to a conclusion as it is to obtain a full statement of a spendthrift's debts, I doubted not that she must have some kind of evidence in reserve, which appeared to support her suspicions.

"No power to resist what?" I asked, refraining from treating the affair too seriously.

"Don't ask me," she answered. "Don't ask me to speak about it any more. Let me treat this morning as a holiday."

"Not a very successful one, I am afraid."

"I began by trying to be cheerful," she continued, as we turned and reascended the hill, with fields on our left and houses on our

right. "But it is always the same now. I always hark back to the one topic; I scarcely think of any other."

"Just tell me this," I said. "This sense of dread has oppressed you for some time. Tell me what led you to give it tongue this morning? Has it anything to do with Mrs. Manningtree's absence?"

"Every circumstance of my life intensifies it," she answered. "The only special reason I can give will seem childish and insufficient. You know that no one comes to The Friars. When people called at first—before I went to Norfolk—Mrs. Manningtree was always not at home and she never returned their visits. Mr. Lascelles had a visitor yesterday. I was in the drawing-room when Mrs. Hutchings brought him in without warning. He was a well-dressed man, looking like a well-to-do farmer: his name was Cartwright. He walked up to Mr. Lascelles and addressed him as Mr. Roberts. Then Mrs. Manningtree turned pale and led me immediately from the room."

"There appears nothing alarming thus far," I hinted.

"I knew you would think so. I cannot point out all the little details which create suspicion. Mr. Lascelles took great pains, when Mr. Cartwright was gone, to explain that he had come to the wrong house. But I cannot help thinking that it was this visit which led Mrs. Manningtree to change her intentions about going abroad, and to leave Tunbridge Wells so suddenly to-day."

"Is not that rather ungenerous?" I asked. "How can there be anything suspicious in the visit of a harmless person such as you describe. One thing I gather, by the way, however: your sense of foreboding is connected with Lascelles."

"I connect Mr. Lascelles with all that is unhappy in my life, Dr. Everest. Yet I have to go home—home! I have no home—to go back to him; to sit facing him at luncheon; to remain alone with him——"

"At least you are not without an alternative," I suggested. "Give up all idea of returning to The Friars. Come with me

now, and before night you shall be with my people in London."

It needed but this repetition of my proposal to nerve her to return to The Friars at once.

"No, no! I have told you it is impossible," she cried. "Good-bye, Dr. Everest. I am not likely to forget you—your kindness—even if we never meet again."

"Two persons can hardly live in Tunbridge Wells without meeting occasionally," I answered, with an attempt at cheerfulness.

"We shall see," she said, and as my hand held her own she pressed it decidedly.

I stood gazing after her as she walked across the common, taking a direct line to the lane which led to The Friars, over the young furze and bracken. It may have been owing to her desire to preserve a brave exterior, lest I should follow and importune her further, but I noticed that her step was light and free, while the supple body, the well-poised head, seemed to indicate perfect physical health and strength, strongly in contrast with my diagnosis of her mental condition.

CHAPTER VII.

DR. DONALDSON.

KNOWING no rest until I made sure of Mrs. Manningtree's return, I left my house in the London Road a little before nine o'clock that evening and strolled towards The Friars. Punctually to the minute Mrs. Hutchings came along the lane with a bag bulging beneath her shawl, and I knew that Dora was alone in the desolate house with Lascelles. Without thinking that she had any actual cause for alarm, I could imagine her feelings, and, in truth, my own were not favourably disposed towards him.

Turning from the lane to the common, a little before ten o'clock, I heard the sound of wheels ; a carriage passed me driving in the direction whence I had come. I retraced my steps, and saw Mrs. Manningtree alight at The Friars. She was closely veiled ; but as the moonlight fell upon her, it was impossible to be mistaken. Yet she had assuredly not come from either of the stations, nor, unless she had subsequently indulged in a country drive, from London.

Reassured, however, by her return, I walked home contentedly,

and, smoking a pipe alone afterwards, tried to persuade myself that Dora's fears would soon forsake her. Then I estimated my own chances of success in the enterprise which was the most important of my life, and in this respect also, retired to bed not entirely hopeless.

Two days later—on Thursday, the fifth of August—I was walking the afternoon round, when, meeting the carriage of Dr. Smith, one of the most popular practitioners in the town, I was surprised to recognize the face of an old Bart.'s man. Lying back in the victoria, with one arm extended along its lowered hood, Donaldson appeared monarch of, at least, all he surveyed : a fair, curly-haired handsome fellow, with the faintest trace of whiskers and no sign of a moustache, his youthful appearance might have been greatly in his disfavour if it had not been compensated for by an air of patronising importance. Though he was my junior, I never felt so young as when in his presence.

"Donaldson ! Donaldson !" I shouted ; and, turning his head slowly, he stared round with lifted eyebrows as if to inquire who on earth dared to take so great a liberty. Recognizing me, however, he smiled graciously, and, telling the coachman to stop, waited until the carriage was properly drawn up by the kerb before alighting.

"Why, Everest, my dear fellow !" he cried, offering his hand in his overwhelming way as he looked down from his greater height. He stood six feet two inches in his boots. "What are you doing here ?"

"Didn't I tell you ?" I answered. "I have settled down to a practice here."

"If you did, I forget it," he said, as if he had a number of important affairs on his mind. "Glad you have settled down, at any rate. Some people thought you never would, you know. I am looking after Smith's practice while he is in Switzerland. An awful lot to do ! tremendous practice ! All the tip-top people in the place."

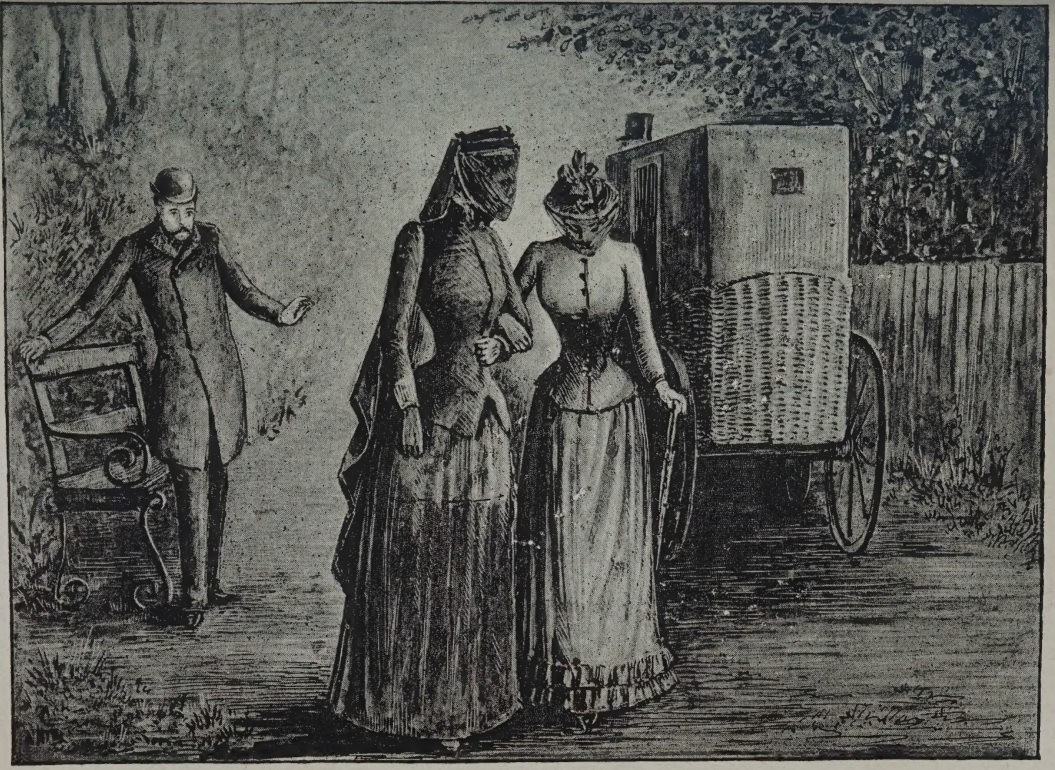
"Come in and see me to-night," I suggested ; "my house is just round the corner in the London Road,"

"My dear fellow, I never have a moment. I only arrived the night before last, and I have been a slave ever since—a perfect slave. You must come to me; you know Smith's place, of course. Come and have some dinner to-morrow, seven o'clock."

I assented, and, first beckoning the coachman to pull up by the exact spot on which he stood, he entered the carriage.

The sympathetic reader will understand why I smoked out-of-doors that evening; and if he has ever been to Tunbridge Wells, he will know that "out-of-doors" signifies the common, which forms the lungs of the town. Indeed, quitting my door, it was necessary only to cross the narrow road to find one's feet on the grass. Strolling towards Mount Ephraim, and past the Wellington Hotel, I took the second lane on the right, and stopped a few hundred yards down to stare at the high, dismal house, with its top floor in total darkness, and to indulge in many "long, long thoughts" of one of its inmates. It was late when I left home, and when I again reached the common eleven o'clock had struck. Disinclined for sleep, instead of going home, I turned to the right along the road leading to Rusthall Common. The night was oppressively hot, and I took a seat at the corner, facing a small pond. The moon was rising, but the tall elms behind kept me in the shadow. Not a sound was to be heard. I had been there perhaps a quarter of an hour, when I distinguished the sound of a horse's hoofs on the hard road from Langton, and presently saw what looked like a white, open, funeral car approaching. As the churchyard was so close at hand, the suggestion was uncanny. The vehicle stopped almost opposite my seat, and now I perceived that it was a quaint conveyance, narrow enough to pass through an ordinary doorway, with room for only one person on each seat, whilst its lower portion was painted white, and to represent wicker-work. The driver clumsily alighted to open its door, when to my surprise a woman stepped out, and in spite of her long thick veil, so out of place on this sultry night, I at once recognized Mrs. Manningtree.

Before I had time to speculate concerning the motive which



"THE GIRL TOOK MRS. MANNINGTREE'S PROFFERED ARM."

led her to alight half a mile from her own door, she leaned within the vehicle, and helped someone else out of it. She also was closely veiled : a tall, slender girl, who could be none other than Dora. The driver being paid, very liberally, to judge by his thanks, remounted the box, and turning his horse drove back the way he had come.

The girl took Mrs. Manningtree's proffered arm, and the pair walked away together. It astonished me that Dora should lean for support on her stepmother, but I remained quietly where I was until they had obtained a fair start and then set out slowly in pursuit. Now I should have resented, indignantly, the assertion that I could fail to be certain of Dora's identity at any time or place. I should not have doubted her identity even now, if I had not seen a light in her window and construed this as a token of her presence at The Friars.

The girl's height was the same as Dora's ; her hair, as well as I could distinguish by the light of the moon, was as fair ; the only difference was a certain heaviness of gait, unlike her light, buoyant movement.

But, on the other hand, the girl, whoever she might be, was in bad health, and this probably affected her demeanour. Occasionally she coughed, when, bending over her, Mrs. Manningtree would whisper in her ear, and, if the cough did not cease, it sounded muffled. What could Dora be doing on Rusthall Common with Mrs. Manningtree at midnight? Indeed, what could Mrs. Manningtree be doing with or without Dora? Why, if she had driven from Langton or one of the adjacent villages, did she not alight at her own house?

Trying to silence my doubts, to assure myself that her companion could be none other than Dora, I followed cautiously until they turned down the lane and presently entered the gates of The Friars. Mr. Lascelles opened the door before they reached it, as if he had been watching for their coming ; they entered the dimly-lighted hall, and the door was closed behind them. I heard the bolt shot into its socket.

Between the laths of the Venetian blind in Dora's bedroom, fell a faint light, and on the other side of the house, directly over the room in which my patient breathed his last, on the unused top story, I also perceived a light: a thin streak at the top of the window, to be accounted for only by the fact that the shutters were closed but failed exactly to reach the lintel.

As I turned reluctantly from the house, and at last came again to the open common, which looked cold in the flood of moonlight, though the night was still hot and oppressive, I began to think I was as superstitious as Dora herself. I could not shake off a sense of vague uneasiness. There was mystery abroad to-night. It seemed ridiculous to believe that Mrs. Manningtree's companion was not Dora. Yet if she was Dora, what was the explanation of her presence, of the weakness under which she evidently laboured! These were questions I was entirely unable to answer, although I sat up trying to do so well into the small hours.

Seven o'clock on Friday evening found my legs beneath Dr. Smith's mahogany, while Donaldson did the honours to his solitary guest. Dinner over, I had lighted my pipe and Donaldson was rolling a cigarette, while he discoursed eloquently of his labours, when he was called to the consulting room.

Left alone, I walked to the window, where I stood looking out on to the darkening street, until the room door opened and Donaldson re-entered with his hat on.

"Awfully sorry, my dear fellow," he said taking his gloves from the sideboard. "A deuce of a bore to think a man can't have ten minutes to himself. I am just going across the common. I sha'n't be long; you will find heaps of books on the shelf."

Before I could reply, he was talking to someone in the hall, and as I heard the voice that answered him, I was transfixed by surprise. A low-toned, grating voice, contrasting with Donaldson's somewhat strident tones. As the street door was slammed, I drew close to the window, taking care to be hidden by the curtains. My anticipations were confirmed: the closely buttoned-up figure beside Donaldson was Mr. Lascelles.

CHAPTER VIII.

MRS. HUTCHINGS' GHOST.

IT was certain that someone at The Friars needed the services of a medical man, and after my experiences of the previous night, I could hardly doubt that it was Dora. That she had broken down as a consequence of her overwrought mental condition was not surprising, although when she left me on Tuesday I had been struck by her appearance of health and strength. Indeed, until last night, when I had seen her leaning on Mrs. Manningtree for support, and had heard her cough, I had marvelled not a little that she betrayed such slight physical signs of her mental excitement.

Whilst too anxious for her sake, too impatient to hear the result of Donaldson's visit, to think much of myself, I felt somewhat sore that Lascelles had not summoned me instead of Dr. Smith. For doubtless had Lascelles been aware of Dr.

Smith's absence he would not have come to the house. It is my experience that a *locum tenens* is generally avoided.

It was not as if Mrs. Manningtree had been dissatisfied with my treatment of her husband; had this been the case, I should scarcely have been bidden to the funeral and certainly not to luncheon afterwards. But presently another idea occurred to me. Perhaps, after what passed between us on Tuesday, Dora preferred not to avail herself of my services.

At last I heard footsteps outside, and to my great satisfaction they stopped at Dr. Smith's door. This was opened by a latchkey. Donaldson left his companion in the hall while he went to the dispensary, and presently returning, ushered Mr. Lascelles out, and entering the dining-room with a sigh of relief, threw himself into an arm-chair.

"Tired as a horse," he exclaimed; "dead beat. Awfully sorry to leave you so long, my dear fellow. If I had guessed it was so far I would have had the carriage out."

"You have been to Mrs. Manningtree's," I answered, "to The Friars."

"Who on earth told you that?" he asked, looking up from the cigarette he was rolling.

"I was looking out of the window when you started; I saw you leave the house with Lascelles," I replied, trying to appear at ease.

"You know the man?"

"Very slightly. A little while ago I had a patient at the house—Colonel Manningtree. He died a month or so ago."

"Oh, Mrs. Manningtree's husband. A devilish fine woman, Mrs. Manningtree, Everest. Well, my dear fellow," he added, as he lighted his cigarette, "upon my word, I am awfully sorry if I have cut you out."

"I don't care a rap about that," I assured him. "What I want to know is the name of your patient, and, if it is the one I fear, all about the affair. The fact is," I said, feeling, amidst all my anxiety, that I flushed "the fact is, I take a—a great interest in——"

"In my patient, perhaps. If you do, I am sorry for you, old man."

"Who is your patient?" I demanded. "For heaven's sake, don't beat about the bush."

"Miss Manningtree. I am sorry to say she is in a bad way, too."

"In a bad way!" I cried. "Impossible! When I saw her on Tuesday she was as well as I am."

"No," he said, gravely. "Miss Manningtree has not been so well as you are for a long time. She has not been anything like well for many months past. Hullo, Everest! what's up? You look as white as she does."

"Do you mean to say that her mind has given way then?" I demanded, leaning forward as I clutched the arms of my chair.

"Her mind——" he said, looking bewildered. "I heard nothing about her mental state. Miss Manningtree is suffering from phthisis, evidently a long-standing, neglected case. There's a good deal of tubercle—in fact, I give her a week to live."

As I listened I felt utterly lost. Presumably, Donaldson was sane, yet if he was sane, assuredly I must be mad. There was no reason to doubt him; I could not believe him. If he had told me of a breakdown of her nervous system, that she suffered from inflammation of the brain, I should have credited his words without hesitation, but that Dora was the victim of phthisis in an advanced stage appeared absolutely incredible.

"Donaldson," I cried, "you are making some lamentable mistake."

"My dear fellow, have you stethoscoped Miss Manningtree? because I did so an hour ago. I tell you that one lung is gone, that the other is going. Her life is not worth a week's purchase. I am sorry if it hits you hard, Everest."

"It would hit me hard if it were true," I replied, careless of his feelings in my intense excitement. "But it is not true, it cannot be true. I am not saying that your diagnosis is wrong——"

"I thought you were; it sounded like it."

"Tell me what your patient is like," I said; "describe her as exactly as you can."

"Well, she must be tall—above the average height, I should say—about twenty, or barely twenty years of age, and quite unusually fair."

"Miss Manningtree is the most beautiful girl I ever beheld," I exclaimed.

"Ye-es," he replied, critically, "a little while ago she may have been good-looking. Now, of course, she is a mere wreck, a mere wreck, wasted, hollow-cheeked, and at times there's a good deal of hectic."

"Then," I cried as I rose from the chair, "it is not Dora."

"That was certainly the name by which Mrs. Manningtree spoke of my patient to Mr. Lascelles, Everest."

"Before her—to your patient's face?" I asked.

"I don't remember. Lascelles came to the bed-room while I was there——"

"Which room was it?"

"On the first floor, to the right of the house as you face it," he answered. And this was certainly Dora's bed-room.

"How—by what name did she address Mrs. Manningtree?" I persisted, still unable to believe.

"My dear fellow," he said, "you cannot have listened to what I have been saying. Miss Manningtree is quite beyond speaking."

I strode up and down the room in perplexity. "Donaldson," I said, stopping in front of his chair, "you will think I am mad, but I tell you that as truly as I stand here, your patient is not Dora Manningtree. Who she is I don't pretend to know, nor why she should be so described—unless Dora has a twin sister. But she is not Dora."

"Of course, old fellow, I know only what her mother told me."

"Her stepmother," I hinted.

"Oh, I did not understand that. However, it makes no difference. I tell you what, Everest; I am not supposed to know

that you have been attending anyone at the house. The case is quite serious enough for a consultation. I will ask for one, and if Mrs. Manningtree agrees, you shall meet me. Perhaps you will then be convinced."

"If I see, of course, I must believe," I said; "but, upon my soul, I cannot believe it without seeing."

Thanking Donaldson warmly for his suggestion, which, if acted upon, would solve my doubts in a day or two, I took my leave, and on reaching the street, staggered like a drunken man.

Sleep was out of the question, and feeling, foolishly enough, that the sight of the house would further the solution of the mystery, I turned my steps towards The Friars. The sky was blackly overcast; not a light was to be seen anywhere, nor could I penetrate the mental darkness which encompassed me.

I stood long outside the house looming dark before me, watching the solitary light which fell through the blind of Dora's window. I removed my hat to catch the faint night breeze on my burning forehead, and the entire force of my being was concentrated in one prayer for help. How I passed the wretched inactive night, I know not, nor the equally purposeless day which followed it. I went about my work, but at each bedside I seemed to look down on Dora's face.

Although nothing had happened to alter my opinion, her illness seemed less impossible, as the idea of it became more familiar. And, ridiculous as it may appear, that which, more than anything besides, inclined me to believe in the truth of Donaldson's report, was Dora's own foreboding of evil. There still remained many facts which I could not reconcile; but there was almost less difficulty in believing that Dora was dying of phthisis, than in believing either that Donaldson's diagnosis was wrong on the one hand, or that his patient was not Dora Manningtree on the other.

The day passed without a word about the consultation, but before proceeding to Dr. Smith's house, once more I turned my steps towards The Friars, this time with a definite purpose. I

waited at the corner of the lane until, at a few minutes past nine, I saw Mrs. Hutchings, the woman who had not passed a day without going to the house since the week before Colonel Manningtree's death. When I accosted her, she was so startled as almost to drop her well-filled basket.

She was a tall, clean-looking woman of fifty, wearing a grey shawl over a black dress, and a black velvet bonnet adorned by crimson poppies.

"I don't know whether you remember me," I said, walking by her side, towards Mount Ephraim, "I am Dr. Everest. I attended Colonel Manningtree. I am anxious for a few minutes' conversation with you—my house is not far off."

"I'm always willing to oblige," she answered, "and nursing I've done in plenty—both monthly and sick. But at present I'm not open, being engaged till September, which is a certainty."

I induced her, nevertheless, to enter the house, and after a futile attempt to hide the neck of a bottle with the lid of her basket, she discreetly drew her shawl over it and sat down.

"Well, Mrs. Hutchings," I began, "and how are things going along at The Friars?"

"Which it isn't my 'abit to gossip, sir," she answered. "Keep your eyes and ears open and your mouth shut is my motto, except for victuals and drink, though moderate at that.'

"Just so. Are you still the only person employed at the house?"

"I am, sir; except my daughter, as helps occasional."

"And you, I believe, go home to sleep?" I inquired.

"I do, sir, and I won't say but what it is convenient," she said, glancing down at her bulging shawl, "and to tell you the truth, which I always do and always will, I shouldn't sleep if I didn't go home. I am not what you can call a nervous party, but it's my belief—and those may deny it who like—that there's ghosts a-walking in that house!"

At another time I might have smiled at the assertion, but I was incapable of anything of the kind to-night. My thoughts at

once flew to Dora's account of her experiences on the night of Colonel Manningtree's death.

"What makes you believe that, Mrs. Hutchings?"

"There's many things as make me believe it, sir, if you can call them things, which I don't know what else to call 'em, though they ain't. First of all, it was at the time of the poor Colonel's death. I knew he would never get well again from the beginning. Warnings ain't wasted like that."

"Warnings?" I ejaculated.

"If they wasn't warnings, what was they?" she asked defiantly. "Sometimes it was footsteps where there wasn't any feet. Sometimes it was voices where here wasn't any tongues. What it must have been like in the night, goodness only knows; it was enough to freeze your blood in the day!"

"What kind of noises?" I asked.

"Cries like some poor soul in trouble, sir, that's what they was. Trampings up and down where there wasn't any huming soul to tramp. Oh, dear, and I've got to walk home to-night!"

"Do you mean to tell me," I demanded, "that you heard these cries just before Colonel Manningtree's death?"

"Yes, sir, and just after his death too."

With difficulty I suppressed an outcry of amazement. Great heaven! I was actually receiving confirmation of Dora's statement, of the statement which I had always regarded as the outcome of her excited imagination. Yet this confirmation only intensified the mystery. Until now, I had believed that those sounds were purely subjective. But Mrs. Hutchings had heard them as well as Dora Not, of course, the identical cries, since these troubled Dora in the night, when the woman would have been sleeping in her own house.

"The strangest thing is," Mrs. Hutchings continued, "that now poor Miss Dora is ill, the warnings have come again?"

"What; you still think that you hear Colonel Manningtree's voice in the house?"

For I had actually seen my patient after his heart had ceased to beat.

"Whose voice it is, sir, it ain't for me to say ; only it isn't Miss Dora's, because she's too ill, poor dear. The only sound that comes from her room is her cough, and that's enough to break your 'art. It isn't Mr. Lascelles' voice, nor Mrs. Manningtree's, and it isn't for me to make no assertions, though I know what it means, as I told Mr. Lascelles."

"You told him. What did he say?" I asked.

"Well, sir, I'm a poor woman with eight living, but I've got my principles. I shouldn't like to repeat it for fear of a judgment which you may never know what shape it'll take. He spoke loud, and he spoke strong, until Mrs. Manningtree pacified him, which I only told him of the noises the same in the daytime and in the dark, and the same before the poor Colonel died, I says. The house is a quiet house, sir, and when you're a-hearing of the clock ticking and not a breath besides, and then there comes a sigh fit to break your 'art, if you've got one, it do make you cold all over, though it's only a ghostly sperrit."

"You have not been in the sick room?" I asked.

"No, sir ; Mrs. Manningtree is that devoted, she do it all herself, with no nurse nor nothing. Night and day she'll sit up not minding a bit. I'm sure it was a shock to me when I came on Friday morning and heard Miss Dora was ill ; a awful shock it were. Send for Dr. Everest —that was what I said."

"Yes, yes, but where was Miss Manningtree the day before you were told she was ill—on Thursday?"

"At home, to be sure, as she well nigh always is, and no doubt feeling the complaint a coming on. Mrs. Manningtree she started out after luncheon, and when I put on my bonnet and shawl at nine o'clock, she hadn't come home. Miss Dora comes running down to the kitchen and begs and implores me to stay till the mistress returned."

"Why didn't you stay?" I asked.

"Ah, why, indeed. 'Stay, my dear,' says I, 'of course, I *will*,'

when there stood Mr. Lascelles behind Miss Dora, just as if he had started out of the ground. He used language again, sir, and almost bundled me out of the house."

"Where was Miss Manningtree when you left The Friars?" I inquired.

"She run away frightened. I heard her shut the door of her room. I noticed she looked scared like, which was no doubt the consumption in the system. When I came next morning, as I was saying, Miss Dora was very bad, and Mrs. Manningtree had been up all night."

"Yet, they did not send for a medical man for several hours," I said, half aloud.

"Some folks never will, sir, though I always do say——"

"As a fact," I said, "you have not seen Miss Manningtree since nine o'clock on Thursday night."

"No, sir, I've not, which is gospel truth," was the answer.

One question was thus settled beyond all doubt: it could not have been Dora whom I saw on Rusthall Common at midnight. Unless, indeed, Mrs. Manningtree returned soon after Mrs. Hutchings' departure and started out thus late with her step-daughter. But this appeared exceedingly unlikely. Yet if it was not Dora, who was it?

"Who were in the house when you arrived on Friday—yesterday morning?" I asked.

"Mr. Lascelles and Mrs. Manningtree, sir, and not a soul besides them, and Miss Dora."

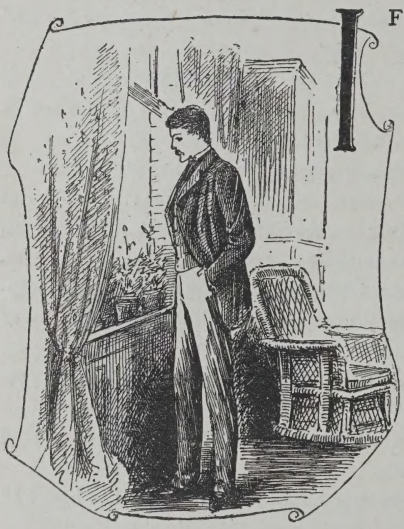
"You have neither seen nor heard a stranger in the house?" I persisted.

"What I heard, I've told you, sir. But there's not any huming person in that house but them three, which I'd maintain with my dying breath."

"Thank you," I replied, and requesting her not to mention our interview, and placing in her not unwilling hand a sovereign, I let her out of the house.

CHAPTER IX.

MR. CARTWRIGHT.



I FELT as if I were acting in a dream, as if I were the victim of some horrible nightmare. Events would not harmonize; everything was disjointed. On Thursday night I had seen Mrs. Manningtree enter The Friars with a companion, who could not have been Dora, since Mrs. Hutchings had seen Dora at home as late as nine o'clock. Yet this visitor, whoever she was, appeared to be no longer at The Friars. This was mystery number one.

Donaldson's patient was dying from phthisis; was called by Dora's name; her description answered to that of Dora. Yet only a few days ago I could have sworn that Dora's lungs were perfectly sound. This was mystery number two.

Then Mrs. Hutchings had described certain ghostly noises even as Dora had described similar sounds at the time of Colonel

Manningtree's death. These noises were audible again now, and this was mystery number three.

Now one thing seemed clear amidst the mist which enshrouded all besides. I had been wrong in attributing Dora's experiences on the night following the day of her father's death, to illusion. There remained this question, Was I wrong also in ascribing her dread foreboding also to fancy? True, it might be due to the depression preceding her present illness—to assume that she was really ill; but, on the other hand, her dread might have been justified by circumstances of which I was still ignorant. For, undoubtedly, when I listened to her on Tuesday, I was filled with the idea that she told me only the sequel to her previous imaginary experiences.

I could think of these problems separately; I did think of them until my head was ready to split, but there seemed no connecting link between them. I could not bring one fact in relation to another, and my recent conference with Mrs. Hutchings had left me more bewildered and more uneasy than ever. Late as it was I presently set off to Donaldson's, and he admitted me in person.

"The women have gone to bed," he said. "Come in, my dear fellow—come in."

"What news from The Friars?" I asked, preceding him to the dining-room.

"Worse," he said, "decidedly worse. It is exactly as I foretold. By the by, I suggested the consultation——"

"Yes," I cried, eagerly.

"No objection was offered until your name was mentioned. It is a rather difficult matter to explain—in fact, what Mrs. Manningtree said was not entirely complimentary. In short, if she had a second opinion at all, it must be that of a London man. As she said she was quite satisfied with my conduct of the case, and as having a London man down would not benefit you—why, I gracefully ate my words and backed out of the suggestion."

"And she is worse, you say?"

"Sinking fast."

Imploring him to communicate with me after seeing Dora again, I left the house, and reached home in a condition bordering on madness.

I rose on Sunday morning after a night of sleepless tossing. Being in the habit of paying as few visits as possible on that day, I sat later than usual over my breakfast, swallowing cup after cup of tea, and little else. The sun shone brightly on the common; a few nursemaids were already out with their young charges; the Salvation Army's band struck discordantly on my ear, and presently the church bells began to ring, and people passed in twos and threes, while I stared out of window listlessly.

At about ten minutes to eleven a man stopped at my gate, and entering the apology for a garden, rang the bell. He was a tall, florid, middle-aged man, of burly figure; his hair and short beard were red, his long upper lip was shaven. Well-dressed, his clothes were noticeably new, while his diamond scarf-pin, his heavy gold chain, seemed to advertise his wealth.

A few minutes later I was entering the consulting-room, assuming that he was a visitor who desired medical advice. He did not look ill, it is true, but neither do a good many patients.

"You don't know me, and I don't know you," he began, resting his hat and gloves on my writing-table, before seating himself in the chair which I placed. "I haven't come for any physic either —never took a dose of physic in my life."

I bowed, which was the utmost that could be expected from me.

"I am Mr. Cartwright, Mr. James Cartwright," he continued.

Recognizing the name as that of Lascelles' visitor of Monday, and being ready to clutch any chance of gaining further information concerning the household at The Friars, I became at once interested in every word he said.

"I hear you've been attending someone at a place called The Friars," he said. "Now, what I want to ask you is about a party by the name of Lascelles. Lascelles he calls himself now; I

want to know whether he ever called himself anything else: Roberts, for instance."

"I attended Mr. Lascelles' brother-in-law," I replied. "Colonel Manningtree died during the first week in July, and I have not spoken to Lascelles since the day of the funeral. May I ask, in my turn, what prompts your question?"

"That's a long story, doctor."

"My time is unoccupied this morning," I suggested. "I am prepared to listen so long as you are prepared to talk."

It struck me that he was by no means averse to discuss the subject, and after a few explanatory phrases, he began as follows :—

"Yes, it's a long story, and the rum part of it is that it's nothing to do with Mr. Lascelles after all, as far as I can make out. I've come here on a wild-goose-chase, doctor—two wild goose-chases; for I've been down once before. But this isn't getting along with the story. I'm bound to go pretty far back, or else you won't make head or tail of it. I was born at Forest Row, close to Ashdown Forest. I can't go back further than that, can I? You can see the forest from your common over there. When I left home a lad of eighteen, I hadn't what you can call a trade. I was a day labourer then; you see what I am now." He extended his arms proudly. "I went to Australia; in those days a man could make his way in the world. I made my way, and as soon as I turned myself I thought of the old folks I had left behind. You see, I hadn't gone away quite on the square. When I had been in Australia ten years, I wrote to them, enclosing a trifle, and mother wrote back. Five years ago mother died, and I knew father was too old by this time to do much work. He wasn't a scholar, and I got no more news of him. You know how it is with a man, doctor; I had a wife and a boy of my own. I sent a little help when I thought of it, but whether he or somebody else got the money I didn't know. Two years ago I lost my boy—as fine a fellow as ever breathed, sir—and grief for him killed his mother. I stuck on for a year or two, but I couldn't fill up the blank; and by and by

I seemed to grow homesick somehow—just like a child, though I was a man. To make a long story shorter, I got to London three weeks ago, and the next day I took the train to Forest Row. Lord! how strange it all seemed. I've seen half-a-dozen log cabins grow into a town in a year or two. I had made a new little world of my own and lost it. Yet here was the same sleepy village I had left thirty years ago with the same jog-trot ways, the very same cottages—it might be the same boys and girls and men and women. If they had told me the old man was dead, I might have believed them; but when they said he had gone away a week before—it was too much. It was true enough, though, and I'll tell you how he went. About the 24th of June, as nearly as I can make out, a parson chap came to the village and put up at the Forest Hotel. He went by the name of Roberts—a dark, lanthorn-jawed chap, they tell me; and one day he stopped to speak to my old man outside the cottage door. Father had given up work, and with the money I sent and what he got from the parish, he just managed to scrape along. Well, doctor, this parson chap soon learned all about him, how his only son was abroad and never likely to return, how he had neither kith nor kin besides, and all about his complaints. This Reverend Roberts soon began to take an interest in him. My old man wasn't the first old chap in the village he had spoken to. He gave him money, and by and by, so father told the neighbours, offered to provide for him altogether. Not that he had much the matter with him in my young days—a grand-looking man was father. You may guess he took a deal of moving, but I suppose life was dear to him like it is to most of us, though he didn't seem to have much to live for. To cut it short, he went; and what's more, he didn't leave a single trace behind him. Well, I meant finding him. I don't believe in your philanthropists, as you call them. I travelled up to London, and I went straight to Mr. Polloy. Mr. Polloy's a detective, about as sharp as they make 'em; you may have seen his advertisements. All I knew was, that my old man had left Forest Row on the evening of the 28th of June; but after he had had the case in hand a day or

two, he said he traced this Reverend Roberts to a house at Tunbridge Wells called The Friars."

"To Mrs. Manningtree's house!" I exclaimed.

"Just that, doctor. Polloy had to go north on a divorce job, and wouldn't be back till to-morrow night—that meant waiting a week, you see—so I thought I would just take a run down to see this parson chap myself. I might have waited for all the good I did. I went to The Friars on Monday, and found Polloy was wrong for once in his life. No Mr. Roberts was known there, nor ever had been. I saw Mr. Lascelles, a civil-spoken gent enough, and, of course, I apologised for troubling him. He took it in good part, and there was an end of the matter, as I thought."

"Then may I ask why you have questioned me about Lascelles to-day?" I said, feeling like one who knows by the walls around him that he has entered a maze, but who sees no prospect of ever getting out of it.

"Well, you see," Mr. Cartwright continued, "I wrote off to Polloy, pointing out his mistake, and he writes quite huffish-like, saying it was me who had blundered, not him—that Lascelles was Roberts, and he would prove it directly he got back. He says he will get here to-morrow night; but, thinks I, if there's anything to be found out why shouldn't I find it, instead of letting Polloy take a grin at me. So I took the train down from London last night, and finding out at the Kentish that you had attended someone at The Friars, I thought I would just take the liberty of dropping in."

"Of course," I replied, "it is impossible to form an opinion until one hears on what evidence Mr. Polloy formed his opinion."

"These detectives are so infernally mysterious, doctor," said Mr. Cartwright. "Afraid of making themselves too cheap, I suppose."

"At all events," I suggested, "I am at least as eager as you are to hear further particulars. On the face of it, the story sounds improbable. I suppose there would be no objection to my seeing Mr. Polloy——"

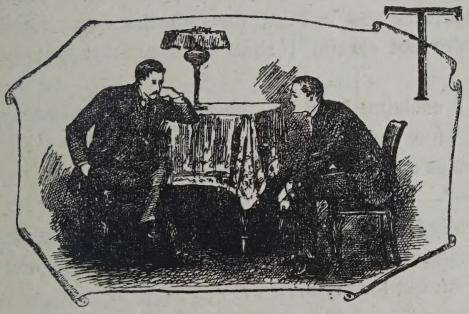
"Oh, dear no. If you like, I'll bring him round to-morrow night. He may be late, but as you seem to have an interest in the business, perhaps that won't matter."

"Bring him by all means," I answered, "and never mind the hour. May I rely upon seeing Mr. Polloy to-morrow at some time?"

"You may, doctor; depend on me," he said, and taking his hat and gloves, he left me.

CHAPTER X.

MR. POLLOY.



THOUGH I should have been puzzled to know why, I did nothing but look forward to the morrow. There seemed little hope of to-morrow's bringing me aught of good, yet I longed to get rid of to-day. There were one or two coincidences in Mr. Cartwright's story which it was impossible to ignore, but, more important than everything else, I remembered Dora's words on Tuesday. She, in what I believed her infatuation, had declared that Mrs. Manningtree's actions had been influenced by Cartwright's appearance at The Friars, just as she had declared that some awful fate awaited herself.

Although terrible suspicions were gaining strength in my mind, I could not yet see a way through the surrounding mist. I was able no more to think clearly than to act, whilst inaction seemed to paralyze me.

It seemed impossible that any human being could desire to injure Dora. There was no reason, not even a mercenary one. Nobody would gain a farthing by her death.

That she, or someone going by her name, lay at the point of death was the only thing certain amidst so much doubt. This was the one fact on which I could depend!

Slowly the day passed, and the next morning I was in Dr. Smith's dining-room before Donaldson finished his breakfast. He rose as abruptly as if I were the ghost of a neglected patient.

"My dear fellow, you look ill, positively ill! What on earth is the matter? Have some coffee?"

"Never mind me; how is your patient?" I asked, eagerly.

"Very bad at eight o'clock last night," he replied, sitting down again. "I doubt whether she will get through the day. Look here, Everest, if you're not careful, I shall have another patient before long."

"Tell me this," I exclaimed. "You have been a good many times to the house. How many inmates have you seen?"

"Only Mr. Lascelles and the widow," he answered.

"No servants——"

"Lascelles generally lets me in himself," he said. "Of course, he and Mrs. Manningtree are very anxious. I generally find one or the other on the look out for my arrival."

"You have not heard any mysterious sounds in the house—cries, or strange noises of any kind?"

"The only things mysterious within my experience of the case are your questions, Everest. Pay attention to me, my dear fellow. You are driving the machine too fast; you are overworking yourself; you want a change. Now, like a sensible chap, take it, before it is too late."

I broke into a laugh, which sounded hollow enough, at the sight of his solemn face, and left the house as abruptly as I had entered it.

How I got through that day, I do not know. What absurdities I was guilty of—how many patients I forgot, I am ashamed to recollect. But in some way the hours slipped by, and as each one passed I ticked it off in my mind as one less for Donaldson's patient to live.

After dinner on this Monday evening, I went to the consulting-room and gave orders that I was "not at home" to anybody but Mr. Cartwright and Mr. Polloy. Now that the hour of Polloy's visit was so close, I was not in a fit state of mind to receive patients. It was nearly nine o'clock when, the door opening, I turned in my chair and saw a short, thin, wiry-looking man, cleanly shaven, closely cropped, and with a nose as sharp as a terrier's. He wore a dark suit of an unnoticeable colour, and carried in one hand a black billycock hat, in the other a pair of gloves and a cane.

Asked to guess his calling, I should have answered that he was a stud-groom or a jockey.

"My name's Polloy, Dr. Everest. I think Mr. Cartwright mentioned it yesterday."

"He did," I said pointing to a chair, "and he promised to bring you here this evening."

"Humph! I preferred to come alone. Mr. Cartwright made a mistake, sir."

"Indeed. Then has he discovered his father after all?" I enquired, with some disappointment.

"I don't mean what you mean," Mr. Polloy continued. "He ought to have waited for me, that's all. I left Scarborough only this morning, so I didn't lose much time in town. Mr. Cartwright didn't convince you that Lascelles and Roberts are one and the same man, Dr. Everest?"

"I had only the bare assertion," I replied. "That was scarcely sufficient. Everything depends on the evidence which connects the two men."

"There's only one man, sir. But you shall judge for yourself. The fact is I want some information from you, and it's only fair I should give and take—give and take, Dr. Everest. I started with the knowledge that Roberts and old Mr. Cartwright travelled from Forest Row by the Brighton line on the evening of the twenty-eighth of June." He placed his hat on the knob of his cane and, as he spoke, occasionally swung it round. "Now there were odds

on their going to London—more people do go to London than anywhere else. When a cab leaves a big station, its driver calls out his destination to an official at the gate. Perhaps you know that. I got several addresses from the gate-keeper at Victoria, and followed them up till I heard of a parson and an old countryman at number —— Ebury Street, Pimlico. The day after the arrival, on the twenty-ninth of June, it seems that the old man was rigged out in a suit of black, and that night, being Wednesday, he drove from Ebury Street at eleven o'clock. I searched the rooms and found in the fireplace a screw of paper. It was a milliner's bill, receipted. On inquiry at the shop, I learned that they had sent a black crape bonnet with a widow's veil to The Friars, near the common, Tunbridge Wells. The box was directed to Mrs. Manningtree, and was sent off on the first of July."

"The day before I was called to Colonel Manningtree," I murmured.

"Wait a minute, sir; on Wednesdays, and on Wednesdays only, a special late train leaves Charing Cross for Tunbridge Wells. By leaving Ebury Street at eleven or thereabouts, Roberts would just have caught it at 11.42. Well, Dr. Everest, what do you think now?"

"Upon my word I don't know what to think," I replied, feeling remarkably uncomfortable.

"If you'll pardon me, sir, don't think anything just yet. I don't know whether you're in a hurry——"

"Nothing on earth is so important to me as the business you have come about," I exclaimed, and for the first time I saw Polloy glance sharply at my face.

"You understand what that business is, sir: to find Mr. Cartwright's father dead or alive. I know a good deal, and I suspect more, but I begin to think there's something else in the background. I see you know more about these people at The Friars than you cared to tell Mr. Cartwright. To begin at the beginning; when did you first make the acquaintance of Mr. Lascelles?"

"On the 2nd of July," I answered. "He fetched me to Colonel Manningtree about eight o'clock in the evening."

"You had never seen Colonel Manningtree before—never set eyes on him?"

"Certainly not," I replied.

"What was his complaint, sir?"

"Apoplexy—he died two days later; on the Monday."

"Now, sir, do you happen to know who were in the house at the time—the servants and the whole boiling of them?"

"There were no servants," I said. "I believe there had been a rebellion in the camp; all the servants had left, and their places were taken by one woman, assisted now and then by her daughter. Besides this woman, there were only Lascelles, Mrs. Manningtree and the Colonel."

"How did it come to your knowledge that there had been this bother with the servants, Dr. Everest?"

"I heard of it some time later," I continued. "I must explain that I called at three o'clock on Monday, the 4th of July, and found Colonel Manningtree dead. As soon as we returned to the drawing-room from seeing the body, Miss Manningtree drove up to the door."

"Telegraphed for?" he inquired casually.

"No," I answered, "in the flurry of Colonel Manningtree's sudden illness, she was forgotten. At all events, they did not wire for her."

"Then she returned unexpectedly to hear of her father's death?"

"Yes. Of course it was a terrible blow for her. She had left him apparently in good health a few weeks previously."

"And where was the nurse all this time, Dr. Everest," asked Mr. Polloy, placing his hat on the floor between his feet as if for the express purpose of rubbing his palms together. "Of course there was a nurse?"

"Mrs. Manningtree elected to nurse her husband herself," I informed him.

He drew his chair close to mine and leaned forward.

"Now I am going to ask you a rather important question, Dr. Everest. Can you tell me when Miss Manningtree first saw her father's body?"

"During the night of her return," I replied, with but an indistinct idea whither these questions were tending; as I answered them my thoughts constantly wandered to Donaldson's patient.

"During the night?" he repeated.

"On her arrival she was so upset by the news of Colonel Manningtree's death, that her stepmother would not let her go to his room until she had rested," I explained. "She retired for the night with the promise that she should see her father in the morning. But a little before dawn, she was awakened by what she thought were sounds of digging, followed by cries, which she took for Colonel Manningtree's. She went to his room, determined to make sure that her father was really dead; the door was locked, but she opened it with another key. On raising the sheet which covered the body, she saw—or fancied she saw—a face that was not Colonel Manningtree's. When she told me about it—in this very room the following morning—I tried to convince her that she was the victim of an hallucination, that if she went a second time to the room she would be undeceived."

"And was she?" asked Mr. Polloy, with surprising calmness.

"Everything happened as I foretold. Mrs. Manningtree took her to the room immediately she returned, and she was convinced that the body on the bed was Colonel Manningtree's, after all."

"Then, Dr. Everest, it did not occur to you that the body might have been changed?"

Great Heaven, no!" I exclaimed. "How could it have been changed. I knew that the body was that of my patient; I had seen it immediately after death."

"But," he said, quite gaily, "how if the man who had the fit

was not Colonel Manningtree, how if the man Miss Manningtree saw in the night was not Colonel Manningtree, but I am interrupting you, and I want to hear a little more yet. You tell me, or do I misunderstand you, that Miss Manningtree, herself, was convinced that she had made a mistake during the night?"

"Ultimately, she became convinced," I explained. "At first she insisted that she had seen a different body on each occasion."

"You appear to have seen Miss Manningtree since you saw Mr. Lascelles," he remarked, dryly. "You told Mr. Cartwright you had not seen Lascelles since the funeral."

"Yes," I replied, "I have seen Miss Manningtree since. The trouble is," I added, with an irrepressible outburst, "that I am never likely to see her again. She is ill—dying; and yet—and yet—I cannot believe it."

I was recalled to myself by a prolonged whistle from Mr. Polloy.

"Who is her doctor?" he asked, quite eagerly now. "Of course, they did not send for you again."

"Dr. Donaldson——"

"How long has he been at Tunbridge Wells?"

"He arrived in the town two days before Lascelles fetched him to The Friars," I said. "He is acting as Dr. Smith's *locum*. When he told me about the case I was dumbfoundered. It was last Friday: he said she was dying from phthisis; on the previous Tuesday, I had left her to all appearances well."

"What did you do?" he asked.

"What could I do? I interviewed the old woman who acted as servant during the daytime——"

"Oh, then they have not suited themselves with servants, yet, sir?"

"They were going abroad," I answered, "but on Monday they altered their intentions. Miss Manningtree herself attributed the alteration, as I thought without sufficient reason, to Mr. Cartwright's visit on that day."

"Well; and what had the woman to say for herself, Dr. Everest?"

"It appears that she also heard strange sounds in the house at the time of Colonel Manningtree's death. Superstitiously, she accepted them as a warning. Strangely enough, she has heard somewhat similar sounds again."

"Ah," said Mr. Polloy, "I am a great believer in ghosts myself; they're useful in our trade."

"Unfortunately," I continued, "she had seen nothing of the girl——"

"Of what girl?" he demanded, as if he would snap me up.

"I was about to tell you that on Thursday night—the night before Dr. Donaldson was called to The Friars—I saw Mrs. Manningtree alight from a fly on Rusthall Common at midnight; more than a quarter of a mile from her own door. Accompanying her was a girl who I thought was Miss Manningtree, until I heard from the charwoman that Miss Manningtree was at The Friars that evening. I saw the pair enter the house, and I noticed a light in one of the upper rooms, which had been disused since the dismissal of the servants."

Without comment he rose, glanced at his watch, rebuttoned his coat, and picked up his hat.

"You have nothing else to tell me, Dr. Everest?"

"Only that I am entirely in the dark," I answered. "I cannot see daylight anywhere, yet I have the irritating consciousness that I am separated from it by a very slight obstruction. I cannot believe that Miss Manningtree is dying—yet I cannot disbelieve Dr. Donaldson."

"It is true," said Polloy, quietly. "Her life hangs by a thread. It is past ten o'clock; there is no time to be lost. I will get you to take me to the house."

As I followed Mr. Polloy into the road, a woman approached.

"Dr. Everest," she said, hesitatingly, and held out a letter. "From Dr. Donaldson, sir."

I eagerly tore it open, and striding to the nearest lamp-post, read the note by its light.

"DEAR EVEREST (it ran), I have just left The Friars. Miss Manningtree died at nine o'clock this evening.—Yours,

"GODFREY DONALDSON."

CHAPTER XI.

SUSPENSE.

PURPOSELY, I refrained from overtaking Polloy until he began to aim wide of his mark. A few stars shone between the lowering clouds, the air was heavy, with a promise of rain before morning. A few loiterers brought out, doubtless, by the sultry night, passed us on Mount Ephraim, but as we turned to our right at the corner, the Common was entirely deserted.

"Read this," I said, as soon as I could control my voice sufficiently.

He stopped by the lamp nearest to the pond to read the letter.

"Not an instant to lose," he muttered, as we made our way along the lane in which stood The Friars.

"Don't you understand?" I said. "She is dead—Miss Manningtree is dead."

"Where is the house?" he asked, for there was no sign of a building as yet in the dark lane, which was so closely shut in by trees that it was difficult to believe anyone lived within a mile.

"Just round the bend to the right," I answered, and we pursued our way in silence, and very softly, until we reached the gates of The Friars.

"That is it," I said.

"Hush — sh! Sounds travel far at this time of night. Gently, doctor. Which is Miss Manningtree's bedroom?"

I pointed to the right-hand window on the first floor.

"Where did you see the light on Thursday?"

I indicated the upper window on our left.

"Are there any out-buildings?" he asked, while I was terribly impatient to do something—I knew not what. What could I do, if Dora was dead? And how could I believe she yet lived, with Donaldson's letter in my hand?

"There is the stable," I replied.

"Show the way, sir; softly, please."

Leaving the gloomy house, which would have been invisible but for its dimly-lighted ground-floor windows, I turned the corner and led the way beside the oak paling which bordered the garden.

This was several hundred yards long, and at its end stood the disused stable. The lane was narrow; its thick dust muffled our footsteps; nothing was heard but the hard breathing of some oxen in a field on our left. Suddenly my attention was arrested by a regular, monotonous sound from the direction of Mrs. Manningtree's garden.

I turned to Mr. Polloy, an exclamation of horror on my lips, when he seized my arm and hurriedly pressed forward, stopping a few yards beyond the stable gate. The stable appeared dark and deserted, but the even thud—thud—thud, still fell upon our ears. I heard a spade strike the turf, heard the earth levered up, heard it fall on the grass.

"Do you hear?" I whispered. "Do you hear that?" And I thought of Dora's experience on the night after her father's death.

"Comes from the garden, I suppose," answered Polloy.

"From the summer-house," I almost groaned. "I noticed that the turf was newly laid on the day of Colonel Manningtree's funeral. Polloy, what, in Heaven's name, does it mean? Was Colonel Manningtree buried there? It is impossible! And even so, why should Lascelles disinter him now?"

"The question is which they would do first, Dr. Everest: prepare the grave or its tenant. For my part, I should say they would settle the victim, and then——"

"What on earth do you mean?" I demanded, clutching frantically his arm.

"No time for explanations now, sir. Work first, talk afterwards. That is a grave Lascelles is digging; it is intended for Miss Manningtree. If she is not dead already, she will be directly Lascelles has finished his present work. She may be alive; she may be dead. There's just the chance."

"But Dr. Donaldson says she is dead," I muttered.

"Never mind Dr. Donaldson, sir. You pay attention to me. Alive or dead, she is probably in the room where you saw the light on Thursday night. Now, the first thing to do is to keep cool. Your pulse is going about one hundred and fifty to the minute, though I am no doctor. We have a difficult job in hand to-night. One of us must enter the house, must overcome all opposition, and get to that room without losing an instant; whilst the other stays here to shadow Lascelles, lest he overhears and rushes indoors to bar the way. I daresay you know the lie of the premises."

"If not, I will soon find it out," I said, eager to be off.

"Most likely Lascelles came out through the back door and left it open to get in again. Better make for that. Do they keep a dog?"

"I think not," I answered.

"So much the better for our chances. We will creep back until we are level with the summer-house, which you think the sound comes from. There I will wait, while you go on. Once inside the house, you had better lock the door to keep out Lascelles. Not that he is likely to get past me; still, you never can tell. Directly I think you have had time to get into the garden, I will sneak over the fence, in case he hears you open the door. Now, doctor, for goodness' sake, keep cool."

"Then, here goes," I murmured; and followed for the present by Polloy, I stole softly and swiftly along beside the oak paling. The thuds were still audible, but I could think of nothing but the object before me: Dora was the goal; Dora, living or dead.

Level with the back front of the house, I peered over the paling and observed a light through the panes of the door by which I had entered the garden on the day of Colonel Manningtree's funeral. That was the point to make for. As I rested my hands on the fence, I felt the first spot of rain.

Descending on the other side I alighted amidst some bushes, the crackling of whose branches sounded as loud, to my excited senses, as pistol shots. Crouching on the mould, I waited to make sure I was unheard, and then, springing across the gravel path to the lawn, ran swiftly along its edge until I stood opposite the door. Now was the critical moment. Two strides brought me within reach of the handle; I held my breath as I touched it, so much depended on its being unlocked. To my intense relief it opened, and in another moment I stood within the house, locking the door behind me.

The passage was narrow here, widening into the hall beyond; a heavy curtain was draped across it, hiding the room doors. I recognized the *odeur de cadavre.*

Before I had stood there a minute, the curtain was drawn aside and Mrs. Manningtree stood before me; in one hand a glass stoppered bottle nearly full; in the other one of those flannel inhalers which we use for the administration of chloroform.

Seeing me she stopped, confounded. Her face turned as pale

as death, even the lips were white as she staggered backwards against the heavy folds of the curtain. But in an instant, she recovered herself.

"What does this intrusion mean?" she demanded.

"I have come to see Miss Manningtree," I replied, advancing to the foot of the stairs.

She glided swiftly in front of me, clutching the handrail.

"You must have taken leave of your senses, Dr. Everest. How dare you enter this house like a thief? Leave it at once."

"Not until I have seen Miss Manningtree," I persisted.

"You must be mad," she cried, "but I cannot argue with you now. Do you know that Miss Manningtree is dead——"

Stung by her words, which I scarcely dared to believe untrue, I stepped forward. She endeavoured to oppose me, but, forgetting her sex in my impetuosity, I caught her by the shoulders and pushed her backwards against the curtains. Then, a few strides brought me to the first landing, where the door of Dora's room stood open. But I paid no heed to this: if she was behind it, she was dead; the only hope of finding her alive was to find her upstairs, as Polloy had said.

The upper landing was in total darkness; approaching the room from which the streak of light had fallen on Thursday, I groped for its door handle, with trembling fingers. But a thick curtain hung before the door; in my impatience I tore it down. The door was locked. I listened eagerly, but no sound came from within.

Receding a few paces, I flung myself violently against its panels. They creaked, but did not yield.

Suddenly, I heard a faint sound within the room—a sob; then the handle was slightly turned and a body seemed to press against the door as if to resist my efforts to force an entrance.

I listened again, and for a time the house was silent; presently the sound came again, so faintly that I could hardly distinguish it from my own heart's beating.

"Dora, Dora," I cried, and the sounds were hushed. All I

"WHAT DOES THIS INTRUSION MEAN?"

could hear was a wasp beating against a window, trying to escape from its prison.

"Dora—Dora. It is I—Dr. Everest."

A piteous cry rang through the house, followed by a fall—then by absolute stillness.

Imbued with fresh energy again I threw myself against the door, until first it showed signs of yielding, and presently flew partly open. The lock had broken, and I found myself enveloped in a curtain similar to that I had torn down outside.

CHAPTER XII.

THE RESCUE.

WITHIN the room all was black. Striking a match, I saw a gas bracket which I lighted. The room was large and low ceilinged; furnished as a servant's bedroom. On the painted chest of drawers stood a loaf and a jug of water. Before the low window several stout planks were screwed, effectually excluding light and keeping in every sound. The floor was covered with thick crimson felt; the atmosphere was stifling.

Dora lay on her side within a yard of the door, her hair falling in masses over her shoulders. As I kneeled by her head, slightly

raising it, she opened her eyes and stared wildly into my face. Instead of drawing away, as I anticipated, she clung to me.

"Do not go; do not leave me," she cried, with the terror of a frightened child.

"No, no," I assured her. "There is no fear now; you are safe—safe from all danger."

"Where—where are we?" she asked, still with the same bewildered, hysterical manner.

"At The Friars," I began, but she looked more vacant than ever.

"Did they not take me away? At The Friars!" and she glanced round the room as if to find some familiar object to confirm my words.

"You are still in the house," I continued, "but you shall quit it to-night for ever. Can you stand?" I added, rising and helping her to her feet. "There is not a moment to lose."

"You must not leave me," she exclaimed, clinging to me still; and, indeed, but for my support, she would have fallen. "How long have I been here?"

"It is now past eleven o'clock on Monday night," I answered.

"Is that all—only four days? It seemed an eternity."

"Do you feel able to walk downstairs?" I asked.

She glanced with a shudder at the door. "Where are they?"

"That is exactly what I want to find out," I replied. "I did not come here alone: a detective from London accompanied me. While I entered to search for you, he waited in the garden to give an account of Lascelles."

"He was digging a grave," she murmured. "I heard it just as I heard it that awful night in June. I knew he was digging it for me."

Half-carrying, half-leading her, I descended the stairs until we reached her own bedroom.

"May I go in," she said, looking ruefully at her dishevelled tresses. "You will not go away—you will wait for me here."

Forgetting everything in the world but my joy at finding Dora,

and my desire to take vengeance on her enemies, I promised to wait, while I begged her to lose no time.

"Have you a match?" she asked, and as I handed her a box of wax lights she entered her room. I heard her strike a match, heard the gas rush through the holes in the burner when she turned it on. Then a few light footsteps, a deep inspiration—a cry of utter terror.

Hastening within the room, I found Dora clutching the brass rail at the foot of her bed, on which, covered to the throat by a sheet and a blanket, just as she died, lay the body of a girl of Dora's own age. Dora turned towards me at once.

"Dr. Everest, what does it mean? What new horror is this? Who is this fresh victim?"

"I cannot tell you," I answered. "The sooner we go to Polloy in the garden, the sooner we shall receive a full explanation. Don't stay for anything now—Polloy may need my help. If Mrs. Manningtree has escaped, I expect he has secured Lascelles."

Without a moment's hesitation Dora accompanied me downstairs. The door, which I had bolted on my entrance, now stood wide open, and I guessed that Mrs. Manningtree had gone to warn Lascelles. I tried vainly to induce Dora to await my return in the drawing-room, and we entered the garden together.

Save the steady pattering of the rain, which was now falling in big drops, all was as silent as it was dark. Not a leaf stirred, nor was there any sound from Polloy. Becoming alarmed for him, I shouted, but there came no answer. Directing our steps towards the summer-house, I could not see it.

"They have removed the summer-house," I said.

"It was in its usual place last Thursday," Dora answered, and walking across the damp grass to our left, we came unexpectedly upon it.

"Be careful," I cried, holding out my arm to keep her back; "here is the—the hole."

At our feet was the newly-dug pit, beside it a heap of fresh-smelling gravelly soil, on which lay the spade.

"Where on earth is Polloy?" I exclaimed, and the next minute I was walking straight towards him. Perhaps it was the familiar, pungent odour which guided me; at all events, before I had taken a dozen steps, I touched his body with my feet. Striking a match and shading it carefully, the light fell on his livid face. Falling on my knees, I placed a hand over his ribs.

"Is he—is he dead?" gasped Dora.

"He is coming round," I answered, my fingers on his pulse. "A few minutes and he will be himself again." And, surely enough, he was soon sitting up, trying to peer through the darkness.

"Did you collar him?" was the first question.

"You forget that I left that to you," I replied, helping him to rise.

"Like a fool, I didn't allow for the woman," he said; and with me on one side and Dora on the other, he presently gained the house. Dora led the way to the drawing-room, where a solitary gaslight burned dimly, leaving the larger half of the room in shadow.

Polloy presented a sorry spectacle: his coat, hanging in rags, bore witness to a severe struggle; the blood ran down his face from an ugly cut over the left temple, which, with the aid of the small surgical case I usually carry, I at once proceeded to stitch up. While I put in the wires he sat bolt upright, pale, but never flinching. Then I accompanied Dora—she was afraid to go alone—to the dining-room for brandy and some biscuits, of which I persuaded him to partake.

"Lascelles heard you open the door, sir," he said, when he had emptied a sherry glass. "He dashed down his spade and off he started to the house. I collared him, and he struggled like a demon. Then I heard the door open again, and Lascelles tried to get hold of his spade. Neither of us spoke, except just to swear now and then. I stuck to him like a leech till someone came gliding over the grass quiet as a serpent. I couldn't see an inch before me—couldn't even see the man I was struggling with; but

I felt something clapped over my mouth—something wet and sweet-tasting——"

"Chloroform," I said; "she had the bottle in her hand when I saw her."

"She lugged back my head," he continued, "till I thought my neck would break, and as she lugged, my legs seemed to kick up as if to help her. Of course, they've got clear off; but," he added, glancing at Dora, "it's one blessing that Dr. Donaldson was wrong, after all."

"Wrong only as to the name," I suggested.

"Oh, of course, he had a patient, and the patient died, naturally enough; I know that. What is more, her death was the signal for Miss Manningtree's, and if we had been an hour later, Miss Manningtree's death would have been an accomplished fact."

Seated in a low easy-chair by the cold looking fireplace, Dora listened intently to every word. Polloy half-filled his glass with brandy and turned towards her, resting one arm on the end of the sofa.

"Now, Miss Manningtree," he said, "I want to know just what has been going on in this house during the last few days."

"I do not know," she replied. "I know nothing since last Thursday. Until Dr. Everest told me, I did not know whether it was Thursday or Thursday week. It might have been a week—it might have been a month; I only know it was a Thursday. Mrs. Manningtree had gone away again. Dreading to be alone in the house with Mr. Lascelles, I asked Mrs. Hutchings to remain, and she would have done so if he had not ordered her to go. I ran upstairs to my own room, but on going to lock the door I could see no key. I determined to sit up. At a little after midnight Mrs. Manningtree came home. I was sitting at the dressing-table, too frightened even to read, with my back to the door. I heard no one ascend the stairs, yet the door suddenly opened, and before I could rise, I found something being pressed over my mouth——"

"Just as they served me!" ejaculated Mr. Polloy.

"I seemed to be falling asleep—I seem to have dreamed ever since. I could not tell how the hours passed—I lost count of time. I became terribly sick. I grew hungry, but feared to eat the loaf which I had touched in my groping, lest it should be poisoned. I did not know where I was. I heard those awful sounds of digging that I had heard before. Then, after what seemed like an eternity—a vast space of time, with nothing to relieve it—I heard footsteps on the stairs. I thought my hour was come. I—I expected Mr. Lascelles, and instead it was—it was—you——"

The recital had caused her a painful effort from the first; now she utterly broke down. After looking at me piteously for a second, she gave a convulsive sob and buried her face in her hands.

Coming to her side, I did my utmost to allay her distress; gradually her sobs grew less frequent, she uncovered her face and looked expectantly at Polloy.

"You see, Dr. Everest," he began, with a rueful glance at his dilapidated coat, "it was a put up job from the first. But for Colonel Manningtree's money, she would never have married him. When she married him—when she first spoke to him for that matter—she intended to get a will made in her favour—not a difficult task for the young wife of an old husband—and then quietly to dispose of him."

"But," I suggested, "I am prepared to swear that Colonel Manningtree died of apoplexy."

"That would be rash, doctor. You never saw the colonel. You were sent for because you were a new-comer—every preparation was made: Miss Manningtree was sent away; so were the servants. Lascelles provides himself with an apoplectic old man, something like the colonel, dresses him up respectably, brings him to the house at half-past one in the morning. They remove Colonel Manningtree to a room overhead, most likely first chloroforming him as they did this young lady. Then they bring on one of old Cartwright's fits by overfeeding him and a bottle of port—that will do it, doctor, won't it?"

"It might," I admitted, staring at him in complete bewilderment.

"You see, they couldn't kill the colonel in what I call a straightforward manner. If they did, how could they bury him. Miss Manningtree would ask questions; they could not simply put him out of the way. So, they find a man who is really ill, they stow Colonel Manningtree away just as they stowed away his daughter here last Thursday. Then they make old Cartwright personate the colonel. When old Cartwright dies, of course they get a doctor's certificate made out in the name of Manningtree. So far it was plain sailing. All that remained was to settle Colonel Manningtree, and to change the bodies before this young lady's return."

"They would still have to dispose of one body secretly," I said.

"They did dispose of it. But who was likely to trouble about an old labourer; it wasn't," he added proudly, "everybody who could have traced him, let me tell you. If Colonel Manningtree disappeared suddenly, it would create suspicion, but nobody knew of old Mr. Cartwright's presence at Tunbridge Wells. No, sir everything promised well, until Miss Manningtree turned up before there was time to change the bodies. When Miss Manningtree went to the bedroom during the night, she saw the body of Mr. Cartwright's father. The cries she heard——"

"They were my father's last words on earth!" she murmured, and the tears ran down her cheeks.

"By going out the next morning you played into their hands," Polloy continued, addressing Dora now. "They must have chloroformed Colonel Manningtree to death in the night; and rather early that morning or during the following night have buried Cartwright in the garden, where I mean to find him before many hours have passed. Then Colonel Manningtree's body was placed in position ready for your return. You see the whole thing was planned from first to last."

"The vilest plot that was ever formed!" I cried.

"I learn that the will has been proved already," he continued, "and if Miss Manningtree had not come home when she did, or if Mr. Cartwright—my client—had not lost his son in Australia and so come back to England again, this precious pair might have stuck to the money."

"Then," I exclaimed, glancing from Polloy to Dora, who seemed utterly crushed and worn out, "do you mean to imply that this villanous plot was to be repeated on Miss Manningtree?"

"I do, sir, and, what's more, Colonel Manningtree wasn't their first victim. There was a reward of two hundred pounds out for Lascelles on another charge on exactly the same lines. You remember the Draper case, I daresay?"

"I remember it perfectly," I said, "but I don't see its similarity to this one."

"It was similar so far that the woman was the decoy while the man walked in at the finish. It's true there wasn't any question of marriage—" He glanced at Dora and stopped abruptly.

"I understand your meaning," I said, "but what I cannot see is this. In Colonel Manningtree's case the motive is clear—vile as it was, there was a reason for it, since all the world knew Colonel Manningtree was a rich man. But in Miss Manningtree's case there was apparently nothing to gain. They must have been actuated by sheer devilry."

"Of course you understand that Lascelles was no more Mrs. Manningtree's brother than you are. He married her four years ago——"

"Her husband!" Dora exclaimed.

"A nice pair, Miss Manningtree. If Mr. Cartwright had waited till I could follow up the clue, I could have nabbed them both. Mind you, I didn't know then all that I know now. It was only when I got back from Scarborough I learned that Lascelles was Draper, though I knew he was Roberts before. Directly I heard your story atop of my client's, knowing the man was Draper, I saw daylight at once. Now you see that they were bound to get

rid of Miss Manningtree before they could set up housekeeping respectably. Bless you, they meant to take a pew at church, and to join the Primrose League and everything of that kind. Though, I don't suppose they meant to repeat the identical process, if Mr. Cartwright hadn't frightened them. Goodness knows what they meant to do. But once they knew someone was inquiring after the old man from Forest Row, they saw that they must cut and run; perhaps go into hiding if the worst came to the worst. Of course, they couldn't take Miss Manningtree with them. Mrs. Manningtree left home the very day after Mr. Cartwright called, and no doubt she chose this young lady's substitute that Tuesday afternoon"

"But," I asked, scarcely able yet to believe in such devilish villainy, "are human beings to be bought and sold so cheaply."

"I will undertake to bring you as many as you want within four-and-twenty hours, doctor: in any stage of disease you please."

"You have a poor opinion of your fellows, Mr. Polloy."

"I have followed my present trade for twenty years, sir," was the answer. "You saw Mrs. Manningtree bring the girl home; there is the fact. The same night Miss Manningtree was taken upstairs; a doctor—a stranger to the town just as you were, was called in the next day, and the girl was called by Miss Manningtree's name. Why," he cried with a burst of enthusiasm, "I would go so far as to swear they chose the very time when some of the regular doctors would be out of the way. It would have been too much to count on finding a gentleman who had just come to the town, like yourself, sir."

"And now," I said looking down on Dora's worn face, "you must come with me, and you will never enter this place again."

She rose immediately and then, as if she had only just grasped my meaning, drew back. I knew what was passing in her mind; but it was long after midnight and there was no other house than mine to welcome her.

Doubtless she recognized the necessities of the occasion, for after a brief hesitation she walked wearily towards the door.

"I must go to—to that room," she said, "but I cannot go alone."

We both accompanied her, waiting within the apartment while she found her hat and ulster. Polloy walked to the bedside and stood looking down on the dead girl as Dora adjusted her coat.

"Another hour," he said quite cheerfully, "and Miss Manningtree would have been there instead."

"I should have been almost glad," murmured Dora, "anything to escape from that awful prison; anything to put an end to my maddening fears!"

"But now," I whispered, "you will be contented to live."

CHAPTER XIII.

CONCLUSION.

BEFORE leaving The Friars I exchanged a few words with Polloy, who undertook to inform the local police authorities of what had happened and to take steps, later, to trace the parents of the dead girl. Then promising to meet him at the house at ten o'clock to-morrow, I hastened home across the dark common with Dora. I roused the servants, who placed before her such fare as a bachelor's establishment could furnish, and declined further discussion of recent events until she had slept. But presently I became convinced that without some such discussion she was not likely to sleep.

"What will be done to them; to Mr. Lascelles and to—to her?" she asked.

"We have to catch them first," I answered.

"Dr. Everest, I hope they will never be caught," she cried; "and if they be caught, how can their crime be brought home to them?"

"Their latest crime—their attempt upon you—may be difficult to prove," I admitted. "But for your father's murder, I hope

they will suffer. Doubtless we shall find to-morrow the body of his unconscious personator. There will be an inquest at which the truth can hardly fail to come out. An order will be granted for the exhumation of Colonel ——"

"No, no," she cried pleadingly, "not that. Let him rest in peace at last. Do not let them disturb him. Dr. Everest, I cannot forget one thing: if she was not legally my father's wife, abominably as she treated him, he did—he did love her. She bore his name for a while: let her go—I do not believe she can go really unpunished."

"It is extremely improbable," I replied, not meaning precisely what Dora meant.

"Whatever happens, do not let my father be disturbed in his grave," she said, as she rose to leave me.

The next morning I left home before Dora came downstairs and reached The Friars at the appointed time. Polloy looked as fresh as if he had gone to bed at ten o'clock, and save for the gash over his temple showed no signs of the fray. In the garden were a sergeant of police and a labourer with a spade and pickaxe. Beside the pit lay the empty chloroform bottle and the inhaler; a few yards to the right of the summer-house was a circular patch of grass lighter in colour than the rest.

"This," I said, as the four of us stood round like as many mourners, "this is where you will find Mr. Cartwright's father. Have you told Mr. Cartwright the result of your night's work," I added, walking away with Polloy, while the labourer at once set to work.

He shook his head decisively: "Not yet, Dr. Everest."

"Have you put anybody on Lascelles' track?" I inquired.

"They have not left one, sir. I traced their footsteps to the paling," pointing to the spot where he had clambered over last night. "But the path's harder the other side, and there isn't a footprint. The Inspector has sent a man out to Langton to make inquiries about the girl. As for Draper and his precious partner, I'm afraid we haven't got them yet. You see, they had heaps of

money ; they could push along to a railway station, get to London, disguise themselves and go right away."

As he ceased speaking, the police sergeant called us to the newly-dug hole, and a very little way below the surface we saw a bundle of sacking. It was carried to the kitchen where Mrs. Hutchings stood wringing her hands.

On cutting open the sack, a quantity of quicklime fell out, and disclosed its ghastly contents.

"Is that your patient, Dr. Everest?" demanded Polloy ; but I was at a loss to answer him.

While morally certain that these were his remains, while circumstantial evidence pointed indubitably to the fact, the corpse was, owing to the action of the lime, entirely unrecognisable.

Nor could Mr. Cartwright swear to its identity when he inspected it a few hours later. He had not seen his father for twenty years, and if he had seen him even two months ago he could not have identified this disfigured corpse to-day.

On my way to The Friars I had despatched a telegram to my mother, and on returning from my afternoon round at five o'clock, I found her by Dora's bedside.

The idea of Dora's immediate removal was out of the question. Last night she had been buoyed up by excitement, but now that the re-action had set in, all strength seemed to have left her. She would require several days of careful nursing before she could leave her room.

The following morning I attended the inquest, which was by no means a prolonged inquiry. I could not identify the body, neither could Cartwright ; and the jury did not share Polloy's suspicion that Draper, Roberts and Lascelles were one and the same man.

A verdict of wilful murder was recorded, though, in this case it had certainly not been committed. A warrant accordingly was issued. But the manner of Colonel Manningtree's death was not called in question, though if I had given my evidence differently, it might, and probably would, have resulted in further investigation.

My principal desire was to please Dora, and in doing this

nobody was wronged. Already a warrant was out for Lascelles and his wife's arrest, in addition to that previously issued in the name of Draper. A man can be hanged only once, and Polloy assured me that this fate assuredly was in store for Lascelles if he were arrested.

I had no doubt that Colonel Manningtree had been chloroformed to death during the night which followed Dora's arrival at The Friars. These people were proficients in its use: they intended to employ it on Dora, and indeed they had employed it to render her insensible on Thursday. Polloy, also, had experienced its milder application.

Now, if Colonel Manningtree's body had been disinterred, no traces of chloroform could have remained after so many weeks. Examination by experts would have brought to light no suspicious signs, and the conclusion would have been arrived at that Colonel Manningtree died from natural causes.

The arrest of Lascelles and his partner in crime would have afforded me deep personal satisfaction; but it was impossible to punish them without punishing Dora also. I felt that Dora had suffered enough already. The servants of the law were left to take their course; but to this day they have not arrested the criminals. Whether these suffer remorse—whether they suffer at all, remains a matter for speculation. But as the police have been constantly looking for them, one would think that their lives are scarcely preferable to the certain death which awaits their capture.

Leaving them to their fate, let me, by way of conclusion, dwell rather on a happier scene.

It was the second Sunday after the inquest—the clear evening of a glorious autumn day. Dora had recovered her strength, her spirits, and her beauty. My mother, sorrowful at the prospect of losing her to-morrow, had gone alone to church. As the darkness fell and the stars came out one by one, I induced Dora to venture upon the balcony which ran in front of the drawing-room window.

"So you are going to leave me," I said.

"Yes, Dr. Everest, I am going to-morrow, and before I go I have to perform the most difficult duty of my life.'

"I, also, am hesitating before a step which may be fraught with important consequences," I answered. "If I take it too quickly, I fear a fall; yet—I do not know how to be patient."

"I," she said, "have to thank you—that is my difficulty. How can I thank you? I owe you everything. I do thank you, Dr. Everest. I can say nothing but that."

"Yes, yes," I cried, "there is something else you can say. Yet I fear to ask you to say it so soon. I was too hasty once before——"

She turned her face shyly towards me, looking for a moment into my eyes. Then her hands dropped in front of her, and she bowed her head.

"That—that seems such a long time ago," she murmured, so softly that I hardly caught her words.

"But," I continued, "everything was different then. Then I believed you were penniless—now you will be a rich woman——"

"I should not *be* at all if it were not for you," she faltered. "All I have in the world I have to thank you for—even life itself."

"Will you trust your life to my keeping?" I whispered. And the answer was the sweetest word I ever heard, even from her lips.

On the morrow she went away; but before Christmas we met again, never to part. We did not, however, return to Tunbridge Wells. For Dora its memories were too painful. As my predecessor died before I purchased his practice, which had suffered accordingly; as, moreover, I was not prepared to remain to introduce a successor to the patients, I made no attempt to dispose of it. The brass plate was removed from the door, and the house subsequently taken by a person who lets lodgings. But The Friars still wants a tenant.

THE END.

Stirling, July 1891.

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